



by Chris Preisler

## Do You Want to Comment?

It is a typical day for you. You are at the office catching up on some paperwork or at home getting ready to spend some time with your family after a long day. That's when the telephone rings and a reporter with the local newspaper begins asking for comments about the school board meeting you attended last night.

As a board member, you are not sure what you should say, and you are caught off guard by the call. The reporter starts throwing out questions about the list of proposed budget cuts the board has been discussing. Those proposed cuts include eliminating several programs and even the possibility of issuing layoff notices to classroom teachers, which would increase class sizes. You know there has been a lot of discussion in the community about these topics, and a lot of people have been attending recent school board meetings to voice concerns about the proposed cuts.

Knowing that what you say is very important, you ask for time to think and if it would be all right to call the reporter back later, but the reporter pressures you because his or her editor is pushing to make a deadline that is just a few hours away.

Should you just say "no comment"? What is the appropriate response to this hot-button topic that has district residents

buzzing? If you say the wrong thing, are you going to do more harm than good to the board and the district?

School board members are being asked with more frequency to deal with the media. In a time when budgets are tight and districts are being held to a high level of accountability, school board members have to be prepared for a telephone call from a reporter or being cornered by a reporter following a meeting. Moreover, anyone who serves on a school board should expect at some point to find his or her name in the paper.

As a board member, you are making decisions that affect everyone in the community because everyone—parents, students and staff as well as former students, business owners and taxpayers with no children in school—has a connection to the school district. That is why media outlets are drawn to schools for news; what goes on directly affects the lives of so many people—the readers or viewers.

"School boards are faced with more difficult decisions than ever before, and the community wants to hear from the people making those decisions," said Donna Frake, education reporter with Lake Country Publications in Hartland. "Budget cuts, closing schools and teacher negotiations are all topics

that boards are finding dominate their time. Taxpayers have become more educated on these topics and want to hear what board members have to say."

Hearing from the superintendent, the business manager or a public relations specialist is not always enough for a reporter. Reporters know that their readers want to hear from elected officials because they are the ones in the hot seat making the final decisions being recommended by administrators.

"It may be the superintendent that comes up with the plan to close a school or cut the band program because of a tight budget, but it is that board that has the final say, and those are the people that we and our readers want to hear from," Frake said. She added that board members should be ready to take responsibility for decisions made. "You as a board member have to own your decisions. Be prepared to discuss in detail the reasons you voted the way you did on an issue. You can't run for a public office and then say you don't want to go public with your feelings on an issue."

Frake said very rarely is it appropriate to say "no comment" or simply "call the superintendent." She said board members should be prepared to offer a comment on issues. If the question requires further explanation or

greater detail, then it is acceptable to give the reporter other direction for where to get the information being sought.

If you are the president or vice president of a board, you will be sought out more often by reporters to make comments and answer questions on behalf of the entire board. In many respects, you have to be willing to take on the responsibility of being a spokesperson for the board.

"There may be instances where there is only time for calling the board president or vice president, so whoever is in those roles may need to summarize or give a brief explanation of the board's position on an issue and speak on behalf of the board," Frake said.

Remember, as a board member, you may have a personal feeling on an issue but you are part of a larger group that takes action only collectively. What you say will reflect on the board and the district. It is important for the board to be on the same page when communicating with the media. You have every right, and should, express your opinions during deliberations, but once the decision is made, support the decision of the full board.

Controversy is not something that reporters will try to create, but don't expect them to shy away from it either. If a parent gets up and screams at the board for cutting a program that affected her son or daughter, that will probably make headlines. But, if that same parent gets up and says the band concert last night was wonderful, don't expect anyone back at the newspaper to yell "stop the presses." A difference of opinion among board members on an issue is also something reporters will keep an eye open for.

"A good community journalist

covers the good and the bad, and every district has both," Frake said. "Board members need to be aware that one day you could be trumpeting the district's good test scores but the next day you could be asked to comment about an administrator that has been put on leave pending a criminal investigation."

The bottom line is board members need to prepare themselves for dealing with the media just as they prepare themselves for board meetings.

So what can you do to make sure you are as prepared as you can be for that telephone call or the on-the-spot interview following a board meeting? Here are a few tips for dealing with the media:

- **When possible utilize one consistent spokesperson.**

If your district employs a communications professional, the board may want to appoint him or her as the spokesperson. This would be a person that would address the media and conduct interviews dealing with actions and events. If a reporter wants to talk with a board member, the spokesperson would set up the interview. The spokesperson could also be the board president or the superintendent. If your board has designated one member as a spokesperson to speak for the board, each individual board member should know how to reach that person on short notice and be helpful in connecting the reporter to this individual.

- **Keep your comments brief.**

There is a tendency, especially when being interviewed over the telephone, for saying more than we should. Answer the

reporter's questions in a clear and concise manner.

- **Develop talking points.**

If there is time, make a list of points you want to make if contacted by a reporter. If your district employs a communications professional, that person should have a list of talking points ready for board members for standard questions and arguments. Keep your list of key talking points to just two or three because that is all you or the reporter are going to be able to remember and use. The interview is a chance for the reporter to ask questions but it is also an opportunity for you to tell your story.

- **Be honest.** If you don't know the answer to a question then don't be afraid to say, "I don't know." Be as open as possible and never lie because that will only hurt the board's and your credibility in the public eye.

- **Avoid saying "no comment."** When the tough questions are asked it is easy to fall into the trap of saying "no comment." If there is a question asked that you would prefer not to answer, simply tell the reporter that you are not the person he or she should be talking to about the topic. Helping the reporter by pointing him or her in the right direction to get the correct information will help.

- **Avoid going off the record.** Unless you know the reporter very well, avoid asking to go off the record. Always assume that everything you say is on the record and could appear in an article. Remember the interview begins the minute you see the reporter. You may not see a notebook or tape recorder in the reporter's hand but, again, assume everything said is on

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the record and fair game to be printed.

- **Review what you say.** You should never ask a reporter to see the article before it goes to print because reporters will never let you see it or control the story. It is, however, appropriate to review your comments with a reporter before the interview concludes. Before the reporter leaves or hangs up the telephone simply say, "Let's go over my comments to make sure they are correct."
- **Ask your own questions.** When a reporter calls, ask right away why he or she is calling. This will give you an idea of what the topic is and will help you determine if you are the person who should be responding to the questions. You may also get a feel for the angle of the article.
- **Ask for the reporter's deadline.** Reporters will usually press you to respond immediately. Usually there is time for you to call the reporter back or even set up a face-to-face interview. Be respectful of the reporter's deadline, but never be pressured into making a response if you don't feel prepared.
- **Practice makes perfect.** If you

know that a hot topic is coming up at a meeting, practice what you are going to say. Think ahead about topics you want to discuss and key points you want to make with the reporter and what types of questions a reporter may ask you.

- **Don't repeat a journalist's buzz words.** Unless they are your own and are positive avoid repeating loaded or negative buzz words. Take the time to explain to the reporter why those words or phrases are incorrect.

When the article appears in the paper, be sure to read it over and make note of any mistakes the reporter may have made or issues that need to be clarified. Don't be afraid to call a reporter to discuss an article after it has appeared in print. Remember to be polite and calm when pointing out errors in the article. Always try to talk to the reporter first but if necessary you should be prepared to talk with the editor. Keeping the lines of communication open with reporters covering your district is important.

"Our job is to get the facts right and present a balanced story. Reporters are not immune to making mistakes, so call us to

discuss a story or to point out a mistake is not something you should shy away from," Frake said. "Reporters are also open to discussing further a story or an issue facing the district. If you have a viewpoint or angle that hasn't been explored you may want to pitch the idea to a reporter and see if he or she wants to pursue it. Remember reporters work on tight deadlines so it may not be something that gets in print right away but may be an idea that can be researched for an article for the future."

Dealing with the media is not an exact science. There will always be instances where you will wish you were better prepared for or even caught off guard by an interview. Just remember to do your best. ▀

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Preisler is the communications manager for the Oconomowoc Area School District. He spent seven years as a newspaper editor before joining the Oconomowoc Area School District. He is also treasurer for the Wisconsin School Public Relations Association (WSPRA), which provided this column. WSPRA, specializing in school community relations, provides visionary leadership and service to Wisconsin schools by equipping its members with effective communication management skills.