

WSPRAgram is published five times annually. It is the official newsletter of the Wisconsin School Public Relations Association. Please address any questions or comments to WSPRA, 122 West Washington Ave., Ste. 400, Madison, WI 53703.

**Printing:** Rogers Publishing  
Winneconne, 920-582-4541  
**Distribution:** WSPRA Office  
Madison, 608-257-3220

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#### Clerical Key (continued)

day; or you're told that your office is moving to another location — your plans to work on a much needed project seem to have evaporated. Your blood pressure is rising, anxiety in getting your responsibilities done is increasing, and the feeling of being fragmented settles in.

We secretaries, however, must take it "on the chin." Juggling tasks is commonplace in an educational setting as I believe it must be in the private sector as well. To me that makes what I do "fun"; but, truthfully, it isn't always fun trying to meet the demands that are expected and have them come out right. But that is where *adaptability* and *flexibility* come in; they are the natural prerequisites for any secretarial position. It is a challenge each day coming to work faced with, many times, unknowns.

So if there are any hard and fast rules about being *adaptable* and *flexible*, I wish I knew what they would be. My recourse when things get a little tough is to talk to my boss because she knows the pace and tasks that are demanded of us and offers a sympathetic ear. When it comes right down to it, we can't say "no" when that is part of what we do.

#### Wildly Fun in 2001!

## Mark Your Calendar!

National School Public Relations Association presents . . .

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WISCONSIN SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS ASSOCIATION

# Crisis Communication Guidelines When Responding to the Media

■ Linda Wickstrom, Elmbrook School District  
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In this day and age, every school district needs to have an emergency response plan to establish clear, consistent and coordinated procedures which maximize the safety of students and staff, effectively communicate necessary information, and minimize damage to school property. An effective plan needs to include procedures and guidelines for staff response which are communicated prior to an emergency and are available for staff to refer to during the emergency. The likelihood of effective intervention can be increased if appropriate measures are taken before an emergency occurs. If your district does not have written Communications Guidelines for use during a crisis, consider clipping this article for ready-reference.

## Communication Guidelines

### 1. Internal Message Management

A. Assess the problem. Know the answers to the who, what, when, where, why and how questions.

1. What information is confirmed? Unknown?
2. Who will be affected, internally and externally?
3. How much can be disclosed ethically? Legally?
4. How might the emergency be reported by the media?
5. What is the worst that could happen? And the odds?

B. Gather historical documents or information related to any similar previous emergency/incident.

C. Determine authorized spokespersons and responsibilities, to include handling phone calls into the switchboard. When the news media call, ask for their name, station/publication, phone number. (See #2 below)

D. Prepare release of information with emergency (law enforcement/fire) Public Information Officers.

E. Establish clearance and approval processes for information

release.

F. Determine limits of disclosure.

### 2. Sample response to initial media inquiries:

"This is what we can confirm at the present time. At approximately [TIME], we learned that [BRIEF DESCRIPTION]. At this point we cannot accurately tell you the extent of the damage or possible injuries other than to say that it has involved [SPECIFIC FACILITY NAME] and [NUMBER] [STUDENTS/STAFF/VOLUNTEERS/OTHER ADULTS]. Their names and conditions are not known at the present time and will not be disclosed until emergency personnel have authorized their release. We have requested emergency assistance from [POLICE, FIRE, ETC.] and have notified the [SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS/ADMINISTRATOR]. Members of the media are asked to gather [AT/IN LOCATION] so that the official spokesperson can brief the media as soon as additional information is available and verified."

### If asked additional questions, make the following statement:

"That is all I can confirm at the present time. I am sure you understand we all are very busy dealing with this situation, and we will need your patience at this time. As soon as we have more information that has been confirmed, it will be disclosed to the public via the news media. The [SUPERINTENDENT/ADMINISTRATOR] has been alerted and is en route now to [NAME OF FACILITY]. Please bear with us in the meantime. Thank you."

### 3. External Release of Information

A. Coordinate release of information with law enforcement and fire personnel.

B. Anticipate and role-play.

C. Prepare opening statement. Emphasize key points in

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**From the President . . .**

David P. Petroff

During the recently completed presidential election, all of the candidates indicated improving public education was one of their top priorities. Whenever I hear politicians or the media criticize public education and imply that our schools are failing, I can't help but wonder if we are "tooting our own horns" enough about all that is "right" with public education. One suggestion would be to ask your teachers/staff to be more proactive in communicating with parents and the rest of the community about some of the great things happening in their classrooms. The following are just a few simple "tips" that teachers/staff can use to "toot their horn."

- ◆ Invite at least one parent a week to visit your class.
- ◆ Join a community or civic organization.
- ◆ Each month write a press release about a class activity.
- ◆ Send home a monthly newsletter about classroom activities
- ◆ Ask a community/business leader to teach a lesson or observe an activity.
- ◆ Volunteer to have your class present a program at a board meeting.
- ◆ Send good news notes home to parents on a regular basis.

In closing, get your staff to help you communicate some of the things about your school that you are especially proud of and begin to get those messages out to the public any way you can. We need to

D. Use this statement, if you can: "This is the first time this has ever happened in the history of the district." Show concern and compassion when appropriate.

**Crisis Communication Guidelines (continued)**

- E. Follow with as much of the rest of the information as possible. You may only get one opportunity to speak to reporters. Tell it first. Tell it fast. Tell it all.
- F. Prepare responses to likely problems/issues/tough questions.
- G. Have a written Fact Sheet on the situation.
- H. Determine which topics will NOT be discussed (with polite rationale).
- I. Be prepared to answer the most likely questions with two-sentence answers.
- J. Check with the reporters on the information they have already obtained and correct where necessary.
- K. Listen carefully before answering a question. Ask for the question to be repeated or explained, if necessary.
- L. Provide the same information to questions when they're asked more than once or in different ways.
- M. Don't let a reporter's silence cause you to say more than you had intended. If they wait, so do you.
- N. Update and revise information as available.
- O. Finish interview/press conference with "bottom line" quote followed by — if appropriate — stating that this matter is still an active investigation and will be turned over to the police department or the district attorney's office.

## Thompson Departure Changes Dynamics; Partisan Split Continues

■ Joe Quick, Madison Metropolitan School District

The departure of Tommy G. Thompson, the longest-serving governor in Wisconsin's history, will change the dynamics of both the Legislative and the Executive branches. With Thompson's cabinet appointment by President George W. Bush, a new day is dawning in Madison. Ascending to the governor's office is Lieutenant Governor Scott McCallum, a loyal Thompson soldier for 14 years, who was a state senator from Fond du Lac from 1977-87. At this writing, McCallum has not named his lieutenant governor, who must be confirmed by both houses of the Legislature. The governor's biennial budget, the only bill that must be passed by the Legislature in every two-year session, will be a key test for all participants.

To add to the intrigue, Assembly Speaker Scott Jensen (R-Waukesha) is often mentioned as a candidate for governor in 2002. McCallum will have two years to show voters he should be re-elected for a four-year term as the chief executive. Democrats believe their time will come in 2002 with speculation that Atty. General James Doyle, U.S. Rep. Tom Barrett (D-Milwaukee) state Sen. Gary George (D-Milwaukee), Dane County Executive Kathy Falk, and others will vie for the chance to be the party's standard bearer in 2002.

The Legislature remains divided with the Senate Democrats holding an 18-15 partisan split. The Assembly Republicans retained their hold on the lower house with a 56-43 advantage. The majority party picks all committee chairpersons, determines which committees will receive bills and controls the calendar of bills scheduled for floor debate.

The last two budgets were not sent to the governor until fall, making it difficult

for local school boards to know what kind of resources they would have for the school year. One of the challenges for the Legislature is to pass the budget by July, which, historically, is when the Legislature generally sends the budget to the governor.

The \$42 billion biennial budget prioritizes state spending and allocates resources for every program and service provided by the state. Thompson maintained that the recommendations from the Kettl Commission would be his budget's cornerstone and McCallum has agreed that many of the Commission's recommendations will be part of his budget. What remains to be seen is what will be embraced by the Legislature.

The Kettl Commission was established in March of last year to rework the relationship between state and local government. Local governments — cities, counties, towns and villages — complain that since the state began funding 2/3 of the cost of K-12 education, support for local government has eroded. In the final analysis, the Commission failed in this regard, but there are still numerous suggestions.

The education recommendations range from special education to accountability. A brief description of some of the key recommendations follows:

- **Strengthen Wisconsin's Accountability System.** The system should contain four elements: "school accountability for student achievement; teacher accountability for best educational practices; student accountability for learning; and, parent accountability for attendance and socially acceptable behavior."
- **Vouchers/Charter Schools.** "The Commission has considered Milwaukee's innovative school-choice and charter school programs...the Commission believes that this experiment offers genuine promise. The lessons of Milwaukee's school-choice program ought to help steer the state's efforts to expand charter schools. The flexibility allowed some schools in the Milwaukee charter program ought to be expanded to far more schools."
- **Health, Human Services and Schools.** "The Commission recommends that funding be made available to schools to offset the burden of providing critical services that are not directly related to educational programming, such as health services, security measures, child-care, and programs for delinquent students, or that other agencies take on some of these activities as appropriate. The amount of additional funding should be commensurate with the cost of providing those services."
- **Special Needs.** "The Commission recommends that the state reassess how we fund the three major categories of special needs students: students from low income or poverty backgrounds; students who are struggling to learn English; and students with disabilities as defined in federal legislation."
- **Special Education.** "The state government ought to provide census-based funding for high incidence/lower cost disabilities, such as services for the learning disabled. The state should begin by stipulating a uniform percentage of disabled in each school district. The state should provide a fixed dollar amount for each of these children, with

adjustments for the level of poverty in the school district." This recommendation fosters the contention by some that learning disabled students are over-identified by school districts.

- **SAGE.** The Commission sent mixed messages about SAGE (Student Achievement Guarantee in Education), the K-3 class reduction program. One recommendation supported SAGE, but another recommended "that the state carefully examine the role that smaller classes can play in helping children with special needs." The Commission added, "that the state consider adjusting the per pupil expenditure amount to reflect the additional cost of teaching low-income students to proficiency."



## The Clerical Key Being Pliant

■ Claire I. Frey, Fort Atkinson School District

It was requested that I write an article on *adaptability* and *flexibility*, and as I was sitting at my desk wondering what I would say on the topic — after so many interruptions — it occurred to me that being *adaptable* and *flexible* is a daily part of being an educational secretary.

During an interview process, words like being a "team player" and being "flexible" are used so frequently that the significance of these words do not have the power that they eventually become. We all want to feel that we have these qualities, and we are put to the test each day.

Typically, we have a mental or an actual "to-do" list that is planned out for the day, week, or even longer if you're that well-organized. You're ready to go with the task that you have prepared for and what happens: the phone rings, and an administrator needs some information only you can supply; someone walks into your office and wants to be a substitute teacher for the school district; your boss wants you to copy copious amounts of material for a meeting taking place that

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WSPRA President David Petroff presented Superintendent of the Year Dr. James Shaw with education's Flag of Liberty and Learning at this year's WASDA luncheon at the 80<sup>th</sup> WASB • WASDA • WASBO State Education Convention in Milwaukee.