

## **Quick Tips for Dealing with the Media**

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When a crisis strikes, the media will likely come calling. Many media outlets listen to police and ambulance scanners and reporters have been known to arrive on the scene before emergency crews.

Should an emergency arise and the media call or come to your school, remember you are not alone.

When crisis strikes, the way it is handled and subsequently reported can make an organization look well prepared and capable – or the complete opposite.

During a crisis, the media can help to get your message across that all is under control, show the Division is well-prepared to deal with crisis and help relay important, time-sensitive messages to parents and other key players.

Here are a few guidelines to consider when an emergency strikes:

1. In Turtle Mountain School Division the Superintendent is the spokesperson designated to deal with the media.
2. Staff and students should be advised that all media inquiries should be referred to the Superintendent.
3. The spokesperson's top priority during the crisis is to communicate with the media and must be kept informed of all new developments. As new information comes to light, the spokesperson should update the media.
4. The secretary or receptionist should be advised to take messages and not to make comments to the media. The messages taken should include the journalist's names, the media outlets they represent, their phone numbers and briefly what they want and when they need it. Have the secretary or receptionist tell the reporters the messages will be given to the spokesperson right away. This person should then be sure all messages are delivered to the spokesperson immediately.
5. In many cases it is advisable to prepare a written statement for media. (See samples on page 127.) After the statement is read, reporters will have more questions and the spokesperson must be prepared.
  - Prepare for interviews by gathering as many facts about the event as possible. He or she should explore with the information officer what questions may be asked. Answers should be formulated. The spokesperson should know what information should be relayed to journalists, even if they do not ask. A statement such as, "One thing you may want to know before we end this interview is that..." The spokesperson should have some point form notes in

hand with three to five points he or she wishes to get across the media. **The spokesperson should use all media opportunities to reassure that things are under control.**

- Cooperate, cooperative and cooperate. If the spokesperson does not give journalists answers, they will seek them out from other sources, who may be very willing to talk, but know little about what actually happened—and who may blame the school or school division. When schools refuse to talk to the media, they will still do the story, but it may not reflect what division staff know happened.
  - Keep a list of reporters he or she has granted interviews, the media outlet they represent and approximately what was said. (If the spokesperson needs help with this while the crisis is at its peak, someone should be designated to help. Remember crisis usually only last for a short period.)
  - Give media updates as new information is received.
  - Is he or she does not know the answer to a questions asked by the media, he/she should say so, and offer to get the information to the journalist as soon as possible.
  - Know what information can and cannot be released –if unsure, the district superintendent and/or information officer can help.
  - Identify a suitable area for meeting the media. Treat media as guests the media. Treat media as guests. Have someone escort them to the meeting area and then walk them to the door. *Do not allow media to wander around the school unescorted.* Be friendly and courteous, but be aware the interview starts as soon as you start talking, even if a camera, tape recorder or notebook is not in sight. *Assume all dealings with the media are on the record.*
  - Be honest with the media. Never lie. If information cannot be released, he or she should say that, “I am sorry we cannot release the names of the students involved in this incident.” “This matter is under police investigation and we refer you to the police for the answer to that question.” “We can’t release that information, but we can tell you that...”
6. When an incident happens, it is a good idea to contact the president or chair of the parent advisory council. In many cases, he or she may speak to the media on behalf of the school’s parents. It may be advisable to ask the spokesperson to brief the individual before speaking to the media.
  7. The media may ask to speak to students. Schools may decline this request. As always, students under 18 years of age require permission of parents. Legally, media may

interview students while both media and students are on public property, i.e. outside of school grounds. Administrators have no jurisdiction asking media not to interview students on their way to and from school.

8. Some should be assigned to monitor media—TV, radio and print. If something is reported incorrectly, steps should be taken to quickly, but diplomatically provide the correct information.
9. Some common questions that spokesperson may be asked:
  - What happened?
  - What did you do?
  - What should you have done? (This is a tricky question. Don't speculate.)
  - Why did this happen?
  - Who is to blame?
  - Has this ever happened before?
  - Is so, when?
  - Can we speak to the involved staff, parents and students?

Some things you can't tell media:

- The names of students accused of crimes.
  - Anything that would identify students accused of crimes or possible victims
  - General information about students may be given: a five-year old boy, a Grade 7 girl.
10. If police are involved in an investigation, then comments to media should be that it is under investigation and the school or school division is unable to comment on the investigation. The police may comment. The Division spokesperson can, however, give other details. It is advisable for the spokesperson to speak with the police to ensure what information can and cannot be released.
  11. Quick tips for dealing with the media during a crisis situation:
    - Deal in a calm manner at all times.
    - Respond to all media promptly.
    - Give accurate information only.
    - Do not speculate.
    - Do not speak for other organizations or people. Do not lay blame!
    - Use everyday language.
    - Keep your own staff informed. They should not have to rely on media for information.
    - Keep a media log.
    - Never say "no comment," instead say something such as: "I can't share that information right now."
    - Do not give "off the record" statements.

- Watch what you say, even quietly to others when media are close by. (Today's technology allows reporters to pick up even faint voices, and whatever a journalist hears can be reported.)