



Talking to reporters about your “needs improvement” school list

The complexity of public reporting of schools that do not meet “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) and the sensitivity of the identification of specific groups of students make it particularly important that reporters cover the issue thoughtfully and constructively. Following are suggestions for taking advantage of a series of opportunities to connect with editors and reporters in the next months to shape informative news coverage.

Develop a credible message with evidence and action steps to support it. Build your media relations strategy around your overarching message (example: “Rising to the challenge: helping all students achieve”), starting with your proposed actions to help low-performing schools.

Cultivate credible messengers (inside and outside state agencies) to deliver your message and support your plan to improve schools on the “needs improvement” list. Local superintendents, parents and teacher leaders who’ve helped turn around a low-performing school can be valuable ambassadors of your plan. For example, when Michigan released its list of 216 low-performing schools, a local superintendent, a local principal of a school that had been removed from the list and a group of parents were available to talk with reporters, each delivering strong, positive messages consistent with the messages of Governor Jennifer Granholm and State Superintendent Tom Watkins.

Provide context. Accountability and standards did not start with NCLB. Education improvement has a long and successful track record in the states. Provide reporters with background that demonstrates how the new federal law builds on the governor’s longstanding leadership in education.

Be honest, brutally honest. This is an opportunity to target help and change, not blame. Be honest and specific about what the data show and what can be done to make improvements. You’ll build vital credibility sharing the bad news along with the good. The new accountability system with disaggregated data helps school systems identify pervasive and specific problems, many of them previously masked in the reporting of averages. Encourage reporters to consider using “needs improvement” or “high priority” when describing schools on the list and not a “failing” label, as these terms more accurately reflect the condition of the school and point to solutions versus a static state of being.

Use multiple channels (inside and outside state agencies) to communicate your message, supporting evidence and proactive plan. Tap traditional and nontraditional media. Alternatives or accompaniments to mainstream media include: local parent newsletters, online chat rooms and bulletin boards, community gatherings, grocery store bulletin boards, Web addresses for information about school improvement printed on local business and government payroll stubs, talk radio, and the letters-to-the-editor page.

What the Research Says

Parents and voters likely will be confused by the new labels. Research shows that only about half are familiar with the No Child Left Behind law and more than seven in 10 might be unaware of achievement gaps in their local schools.

There isn’t yet a clear position among parents about the value of reporting the performance of different student groups. Fifty-three percent say it will be helpful; 47 percent believe it will be harmful. While 56 percent of parents think it is fair to report a school needs improvement if even one group of students is falling behind, 55 percent think such a label is unfair if it is applied to an “excellent” local school where the “vast majority” of students meet the standards.

In this environment, governors and other state leaders have a special obligation to explain what their education reform policies are designed to do — and why they are so urgently needed.

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Take advantage of the “hooks” that make news.

Sequence the release of data and announcements into digestible, user-friendly parcels. Reporters usually cover only a limited quantity of data and issues at a time. Think of your media plan as a series of “lesson plans” that highlight and inform readers and viewers about specific problems and solutions that can be covered in one story (typically one-and-a-half minutes on television and 800 words in a newspaper). This also will give you more control over the message.

Newshooks to help plan for and plant the next generation of stories. The ingredients that comprise news are fairly predictable. Knowing this can help you take advantage of built-in media opportunities, create some of your own and anticipate the kinds of stories that are likely to develop.

Controversy is probably the most effective newshook. Issue a challenge. Many governors and state superintendents have decried the current complacency about conditions that sustain the achievement gap. Conversely, if you are on the receiving end of a “controversy,” try not to be defensive. Instead, welcome the opportunity to bring focus to the issue of making the education system serve *all* students and talk about solutions.

Anomalies (the strange, the unusual, the exception to the rule) are a staple of news. In education these include stories about the rich, white, suburban school district on the “needs improvement” list or the isolated rural school district struggling to comply with choice and teacher quality provisions. Stress that laws are rarely perfect and exceptions will have to be negotiated, but nothing should distract educators from serving *all* children well. Suggest that a reporter cover a “beating the odds” school that illustrates the improved student achievement that is possible when assumptions are challenged and adults commit to making the changes required to ensure that schools serve *all* children.

Comparisons among school and student performance, school staff qualifications, school budgets, and conditions offer rich content to make pitches to reporters. With an unprecedented amount of school data available, communicators can draw attention to efforts to close the achievement gap among different groups of students. Reporters are attracted to the most dramatic angles. References to “first,” “only,” “record-breaking,” “significant,” or “highest” and “lowest” will make a story more appealing. For example, this *Charlotte Observer* story offered the “first look at

Messages That Work

Recent research by The BRT reinforces the effectiveness of the following messages. The poll and focus groups revealed strong support for messages that address shared accountability and a moral obligation to serve all students well.

1. Helping all children master the basics of reading and math is the right thing to do — and builds on school-improvement efforts under way in this state for many years.
2. Helping all children learn more is doable, no matter what their background. We have many examples of schools that are succeeding.
3. This won’t be easy.
4. Helping all children reach higher standards will take all of us. Here is what we are doing.

student performance under the public school choice plan (www.charlotte.com/mlld/charlotte/living/education/6052552.htm).

Consumer-oriented “news you can use” is an angle ripe for communicating about low-performing schools. It brings a story one step beyond the comparisons described above. Produce a series of tools that help parents evaluate quality or options in their school, or help them be better advocates for their child. These can be pitched to reporters and offered as a source for story ideas and link to more information for their readers. The National Governors Association’s series of Governors Guides on a range of education issues is an excellent vehicle, addressing literacy, teacher quality, testing and accountability (www.nga.org).

Human interest angles bring a story to life. They include stories of real people and their triumphs, tragedies and experiences. Find classroom examples that illustrate the concept you’re trying to convey — teaching special needs students, using test data to make changes in instruction, etc. The *Detroit Free Press* featured a series on reading efforts in local schools linked to No Child Left Behind. (www.freep.com/news/education/reading.htm).



Trends suggest patterns in policy, attitudes, opinions or practices. They gain attention. Three is a trend; find at least three examples to assert that a new trend is emerging in parent involvement, professional development, students taking more college-prep classes, etc. A *Chicago Sun-Times* story compared the declining dropout rates of Hispanic students with other groups of students and examined some of the complex factors in shifting dropout rates (www.suntimes.com/output/education/cst-nws-hisp13.html).

Time lines/calendar opportunities offer pegs for news stories. “Back to school” can be a hook for many education stories. Testing dates, the release of report card data and professional development institutes are other significant events to include on your news calendar.

Announcements about programs to help schools on the “needs improvement” list, new reports or policies make news. Making your announcement at a turnaround school is a good way to applaud innovation and demonstrate what is possible and provide a visual setting for television. Michigan Governor Granholm’s announcement at a turnaround elementary school offered a host of newsmaking material and was covered by every local television news affiliate. It featured an announcement of a series of *new* programs to help struggling schools and students. Other states have made effective use of celebration announcements of the schools that are coming off the “needs improvement” lists or have made significant gains.

Localize a national story (and vice versa). Take a nationally breaking story and emphasize its local impact, i.e., how the new federal education accountability system is affecting students and teachers in your community’s schools. The new federal definition of a “highly qualified” teacher is an opportunity to examine teaching quality in local schools and to look beyond licensing and certification for other qualities and professional development efforts that improve teaching.

Ohio localized state and national achievement gap data by recognizing “Schools of Promise” — schools with a poverty level of 50 percent or higher and where at least 75 percent of the students have passed the math and/or reading portions of the proficiency tests. Superintendent Susan Zelman’s quote — “These schools demonstrate that demographics should not determine a student’s academic destiny” — was picked up in several news stories about the schools (www.enquirer.com/editions/2003/06/10/loc_skulaward10.html).

Anniversaries/milestones and “on this date” stories are easy to plan and prepare for and are a major “newshook” for many editors. One year later, one decade later. For example, The Education Trust used the anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education* to draw attention to the achievement gap among different groups of students.

Fresh angle on an old story. Take an old story and put a fresh twist on it. Example: compare teacher licensing requirements to that of other professions, or compare diagnostic tests used in the classroom to those used in the doctor’s office.

Tell Your Story in Chapters

News coverage of the announcement of schools on the “needs improvement” list represents the first chapter in an evolving story. Keep your focus on pitching the *next* story about solutions and announcements of progress. These can include:

- Hosting a state education summit with key stakeholders (Georgia Gov. Perdue will convene a summit of teachers, parents and school leaders. This action sends a powerful message of inclusion and state leadership that listens to those closest to the students for solutions.);
- Highlighting summer professional development institutes for teachers and principals;
- Recognizing the schools that improved enough to move off the list;
- Announcing state initiatives (including public school choice and tutoring) based on the data to help even more schools and students improve;
- Showcasing a new level of parental involvement generated by choice options;
- Helping students prepare for the state test; and,
- Announcing state NAEP scores.



Personality profiles may feature individuals, community leaders or galvanizing spokespersons who may become news themselves because their story is compelling and they represent an “up and coming” leader. Find an outstanding teacher, parent leader, student or principal to tell reporters about.

Strange bedfellows that involve unlikely allies coming together over an issue make provocative news stories. Turning around low-performing schools requires a strong alliance of stakeholders. For example, an alliance of teachers, administrators, school board members and community leaders, who usually come together around broader issues like budgets and school bonds, decided to get really specific in Seattle. The group came together to create a districtwide literacy team and place a full-time literacy-instruction coach in every elementary and middle school (www.seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/education/134987049_reading13m.html).

Promote user-friendly, online resources with multiple layers of information. Communicating about a topic as confusing and complex as AYP requires time and relationships that establish your credibility. The North Carolina education department started briefing reporters and editorial boards about AYP this past winter and published a comprehensive communications toolkit with advice, templates and sample materials (www.ncpublicschools.org/nclb).

Multilayered, easy-to-navigate online resources are invaluable to reporters covering the evolving issues of NCLB. Think of the folder as a deskside reference that reporters can use. Include a glossary of terms; a time line of events and important dates; tips for parents; FAQs; research; and a link to the Education Trust’s “ABC’s of AYP” (www.edtrust.org) and the Public Education Network’s community action guide (www.pen.org).

Suggest that media produce a special series on issues raised in NCLB, including teacher quality, achievement gaps between different groups of students, the various types of and uses for tests, evaluating quality among schools, and tutoring programs. For example, the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette* and *Chicago Sun Times* each did an excellent series on teacher quality. (www.post-gazette.com/localnews/20030202overviewregxp1.asp and www.suntimes.com/special_sections/failing_teacher/index.html#part1). The *Boston Globe* did a two-part series on the role of attendance in the high school graduation test scores (www.boston.com/dailyglobe2/152/learning/Faithful_attendance_seen_as_an_MCAS_key+.shtml).

Practice selective engagement and don’t repeat the negative. You likely will not agree with every story and may be disappointed about the coverage opposition voices receive. Don’t get distracted and drawn into responding to every point of disagreement. Evaluate carefully whether a response is truly warranted. Responding to cynical spin may only fuel more negativity. If a response is necessary, keep it positive and focused on solutions. Repeating your opposition’s negative message only gives it credence. Instead, focus on the future and provide localized information sources that parents can use to get specific information about their child’s school.

