

VENTURA COUNTY OFFICE OF EDUCATION

ADMINISTRATIVE REGULATION NO. 3523

ADOPTED: 11/14/05

CLASSIFICATION: General Administrative Policies

**REVISED: 3/23/09
10/3/11**

SUBJECT: Media Relations

The Ventura County Office of Education has an interest in healthy public discourse on issues of importance and in providing a consistent message to the public concerning education issues. The Superintendent recognizes that the media significantly influences the public's understanding of school/program issues and can greatly assist VCOE in communicating with the community about school/program needs. The Superintendent desires to accommodate media requests for information and to provide accurate, reliable and timely information. A media communications plan has been developed to direct staff in dealing with the media and to avoid potential public misunderstanding about positions of the Ventura County Office of Education.

MEDIA COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

The Superintendent is the official spokesperson for the Office. All reporter requests for comment by VCOE staff on education issues should initially be re-directed to the Superintendent. In the event that the Superintendent is unavailable, these requests shall be directed to the appropriate Branch Associate Superintendent.

The Superintendent may request a staff member to act as spokesperson on an educational issue and, therefore, will connect the reporter with that staff member. The Superintendent will notify the staff member before they receive a reporter's call for this purpose.

Staff members are encouraged to participate in public discourse on important community issues, but should not identify themselves as staff of the Ventura County Office of Education when doing so. All Letters to the Editor and OpEd pieces concerning education that are written by staff members, not as employees but as individual citizens, should, as a courtesy, be provided to the Superintendent prior to submission to the paper. Such letters that identify the author as a VCOE staff member should consider feedback on the piece provided by the Superintendent.

WHEN THE MEDIA CALLS YOU

A reporter, producer, or other news media representative may call your office or site for a number of reasons, including: To get information for a story about VCOE or one of its programs or schools; to get information about a VCOE student or staff member; or to get information or comments for an education news story.

All staff should act with courtesy and professionalism when taking calls from the news media. How this call is handled may be the reporter's first impression of VCOE and may be reflected in any resulting news coverage.

All media calls are to be referred to the Superintendent's office at (805) 383-1901. You should use the following statement: "Our office policy is to first refer all media inquiries to our Superintendent. I can transfer you to his office or take down the information and forward it to his office." Please see the attached Media Contacts Form (Exhibit 1) for guidance when talking to the media.

From time to time, you may be asked to provide specific data about a program in which you have direct knowledge. If that information is readily available, please provide it to the media. However, you should not make judgments or take a position on what the data shows. The Superintendent will act as the office spokesperson in these cases unless you are specifically directed to respond in his place. If you do provide specific data to the media, you should submit a Media Contacts Form (Exhibit 1) to the Superintendent's office and include a description of the information provided to the media representative along with the other data requested on the form.

Try to take a media call right away or return the call within 30 minutes. Use the attached Media Contacts Form (Exhibit 1) to gather the basic information about the media inquiry and forward that information to the Superintendent's office as soon as possible.

When answering or returning media calls, determine:

1. The reporter's name, media outlet, phone, fax, e-mail
2. The reporter's deadline
3. The subject/intent of the story
4. What the reporter wants – information, interview, photo/videotaping, site visit

Avoid allowing a reporter to compel you to answer questions on the spot. It is always beneficial to prepare for an interview in order to better provide more accurate information.

If at all possible, ensure that the reporter's deadline is met.

WHEN THE MEDIA SHOW UP

A reporter or camera crew may show up unannounced at a VCOE site. This is most likely to occur in crisis situations at the site or in the community, or it could occur if the media learn about an event at your site from another source.

When the story is countywide, such as labor negotiations, testing, policy implementation, etc., re-direct the reporter to the county office for interviews rather than using the school site as a backdrop.

Media representatives, like all other visitors, must register immediately upon entering any school building or grounds when school is in session. The site Principal or other appropriate staff member shall be assigned to escort the media while they move around the facilities.

When dealing with reporters and camera crews use the same general guidelines for handling media calls. Even if a reporter is on site, you are not required to answer questions on the spot. Reschedule the interview for a mutually agreeable time so you can contact the Superintendent's office, gather information, and prepare a response.

News media representatives have certain rights of access to public schools for legitimate news-gathering purposes. At the same time, school officials have the authority to deny such access when they believe the media's presence would disrupt normal educational operations.

Staff may provide the media with student directory information, including, but not limited to, the name of a student, school of attendance, grade level, honors, and activities - unless the student's parent/guardian has submitted a written request that such information not be disclosed. Staff shall not release information that is private or confidential as required by law, Board policy or administrative regulation. No other access to student records or personally identifiable student information may be provided without written parent/guardian permission.

Document the reporter's visit and what was said and what you observed. A copy of the notes should be sent immediately to the Superintendent's office.

STUDENTS' RIGHT TO SPEAK

Staff shall not impose restraints on students' right to speak freely with media representatives at those times which do not disrupt normal educational operations. However, interviews of students cannot create substantial disorder or impinge on the rights of others. Therefore, in order to minimize possible disruption, media representatives who wish to interview students at school are strongly encouraged to make prior arrangements with the principal. At their discretion, parents/guardians may also instruct their children not to communicate with media representatives.

When interviewing or photographing a special education student, he/she shall not be identified as a special education student without prior written parent/guardian permission.

VCOE students who are under the jurisdiction of the Juvenile Court and/or supervision of the Probation Department cannot be interviewed, photographed, or filmed – *even on a confidential basis* – without prior approval.

Ensure that any students to be interviewed or photographed have a signed VCOE "Parent/Guardian Publicity Authorization and Release" form on file that does not prohibit such activities.

WHEN YOU WANT MEDIA COVERAGE

When you believe you have a positive news story to share with the public, contact the appropriate Branch Associate Superintendent. The Superintendent coordinates VCOE's media contacts and is the only VCOE person authorized to distribute news releases or hold press conferences.

Please do not contact a reporter directly without first going through the process outlined below.

1. Contact the appropriate Branch Associate Superintendent at least two weeks in advance of events you want to publicize. The Associate Superintendent will work with you to gather information and make a recommendation if and how the news media should be contacted.
2. After all the information is gathered, the topic and backup information will be presented to the Superintendent. The Superintendent will use measures similar to those used by editors and reporters to determine if your story is newsworthy.

Examples of strong news stories include:

- a. Unique or unusual programs or special events, a first, a new way of doing things.
- b. Things highly relevant to the public who read the newspaper, listen to the radio or watch TV
- c. Expert commentary on and interpretation of current events (especially if it's a new or controversial point of view)
- d. Interesting or unusual students/staff stories/profiles with strong human interest

Examples of weaker stories include:

- a. Conferences, guest speakers, and visitors
 - b. Programs/events that are not unique – unless they represent an interesting trend
 - c. Awards/appointments
3. If approved for distribution, the Superintendent will determine which media outlets might be interested in the story and how the information will be conveyed. If the article is to be given to the print media, it is the responsibility of the department/branch to submit a final draft document on the approved VCOE News Release Form (Exhibit 2) to the Superintendent's Office.

4. Some news items may be more appropriate for internal publicity, such as through VCOE-published newsletters and web pages and will not be forwarded to the media.

CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLAN

During a disturbance or crisis situation, the first priority of school staff is to assure the safety of students and staff. However, the Superintendent recognizes the need to provide timely and accurate information to parents/guardians and the community during a crisis. The Superintendent also recognizes that the media have an important role to play in relaying this information to the public. The County Superintendent or designee may assign a staff member to come to the district/school site to assist in supporting communication. In order to help ensure that the media and district work together effectively, the Superintendent or designee shall develop a crisis communication plan to identify communication strategies to be taken in the event of a crisis.

The crisis communications plan may include, but not be limited to, the identification of a media center location, development of both internal and external notification systems, and strategies for press conference logistics.

The Superintendent or designee shall include law enforcement and media representatives in the crisis communication planning process.