

GRASSROOTS IN THE PUBLIC EYE

The grassroots movement is turning heads towards education reform throughout the country. With new federal legislation backing the reform movement, there is no better time to get the word out, especially in California.

The grassroots are the parents, teachers, grandparents, and everyday people who are in the trenches, bringing about real reform in communities all over the country. You may not feel like you hold the power, but you are the key to making schools better for all children.

Throughout America's history, grassroots groups have brought about major social changes. Today the grassroots are rallying again, and this time its about getting a quality education for all kids.

GETTING THE MESSAGE OUT

Developing a strategy for working with the media is an important step to achieving your mission. Your media strategy should be comprehensive; encompass print, radio, and television formats; and should aim to do publicize your organization, shape the debate on your issue, and inform and rally the public.

Communication is the key to school reform. The media is a powerful force shaping public opinion, as well as talking to people you would not normally be able to. Surprisingly, many Americans still do not know much about education reform – your friends, neighbors, and colleagues may be part of that group. As a champion of quality education, you may play the role of both teacher and advocate. Using the media to get your message across to a wide audience is a powerful way to inform others and rally support.

CREATING A PROGRAM TO HELP THE MEDIA WORK WITH YOU

The care and feeding of the press is very important. Part of your job is to help them do their job. If you follow the advice below and stay in regular contact with the press, they'll come to view you as a valuable resource. They'll take your calls. They'll use your information. They will even quote you.

Newspaper reporters, broadcast journalists and the radio media are overwhelmed by the amount of material and information they receive on a regular basis. They are constantly being contacted by any number of groups trying to convince them that their story is worth telling. So, as you begin courting the media, keep in mind that you are competing with everyone who has something to share with the public. The key to winning over the media is in establishing good relationships in which they can rely on you for information and assistance in reporting education news.

KNOW HOW THE PRESS IS STRUCTURED

Reporters come in all shapes and sizes, and so do media outlets. You must have complete list of people who may be likely to cover education reform and your efforts. Making a list of media contacts is tedious and must be updated often, but it is critical to broad, effective press coverage. (In addition to the lists below, read newspaper and magazine mastheads and watch television program credits to give you other ideas about whom you should be contacting.) Titles to look for include:

Newspapers: Education reporter, city or metropolitan reporter, assignment editor, metro desk editor, editorial page editor, general editor and publisher. Don't overlook the free and weekly neighborhood papers.

Magazines: Feature editor, editor-in-chief and publisher.

TV: News desk, assignment editor, education reporter, special events producer and anchor. Start off with the local network affiliates rather than the national bureaus.

Radio: Executive producer, producer for a particular show and program host. Include both local and syndicated programs.

Wire Services: Contact the regional or state bureau, often located in the state capital. Include the Associated Press, United Press International, Reuters and Scribbs Howard.

News organizations and larger television outlets: Producers of news and feature shows at cable stations, both local and national, regularly sift through the information they get to find good stories. Include CNN and other regional or local cable programs on your list, and include them in any releases you might do.

A NOTE ON PUBLICATIONS

When putting together your publications media contact list, go beyond the traditional local or regional newspapers. Publications like the *Indiana Business Magazine*, the *New York Journal* and the *Connecticut Magazine* serve a particular state or region. In addition, many areas have local focus newspapers, like the District of Columbia's *Washington Parent*, *The Citizen* and *City Paper*. These publications are often free to the public because they are supported by their advertisers. The advertising rates are cheaper than most large for-profit newspapers, and you might consider running an advertorial or an announcement about your group or an event. These types of publications are "community friendly," in that they target families, run listings of events in the area and highlight the work of local groups. Many times, these smaller papers are on a shoestring budget and look for contributions of stories. Often they cover local politics and education issues more in depth. Get in touch with their reporters and editorial board, and also consider contributing your own articles and essays.

FIRST CONTACT WITH LOCAL MEDIA

After you have put together your media list, you will want to start making personal contacts. Begin with the editor or education reporter at your local or regional newspaper and with any feature writers who handle local "hot news" and human interest stories. If at all possible, set up a face-to-face meeting rather than a phone interview.

In this first meeting, you'll want to tell them about your group's agenda and goals, some key members of your team and their affiliations and some specific short-term projects. For example: "Our group's purpose is to help inform the public about their schools and how they can help to make them better. Board member Mrs. X is a teacher who supports giving educators professional authority in their classrooms. Supporter Mr. Y is head of the local Chamber of Commerce and is dedicated to raising our students' level of learning. We have collected X dollars to begin educating the people here in Smithville and plan to hold a town meeting on specific issues within the next few months. We hope to work closely with the school people, but we know this will be a sensitive issue as they may feel targeted. Let me tell you a bit more about why we formed and what we hope to achieve."

And that is where you begin the bulk of your sales pitch, based on hard facts, insightful anecdotes and testimony, and examples of successes either in your community or elsewhere. Remember, you want your organization viewed as a source for information, not propaganda.

You already may have met with or written to your local representative, whether a state legislator, a city council member or even the mayor. As we suggested earlier in discussing endorsements from elected officials, you may want to try to get a brief quote, policy suggestion or program support from your representative for public record. You can quote that official's policies or insights

on education and reform to the media. Being able to "drop a name" to the media, with a quote on your organization's behalf, shows them you've done your homework and that you're connected to and supported by representatives of the people. You'll avoid the risk of being dismissed as just one more concerned parent on a personal crusade with no real power to change the system.

FOLLOW YOUR EDUCATION REPORTERS

The key to developing a relationship with the media is in making frequent contact. It need not always be in person. You should develop a fax list and a mailing list, and frequently send communications updating media contacts on breaking local news, regional news and even national news that may not yet have reached them. (For tips on how to create and use news releases, see "Publicizing Your Organization or Event" later in this chapter.)

If, for example, you already have briefed a local newspaper reporter on charter schools and your efforts for them, then continue to keep them abreast of breaking stories in other states or regions. If you've learned that another state has just passed legislation, put out a brief news release headed with the words "MEDIA ALERT." Highlight the legislation's strong points and unique provisions, and then give the news a local spin, or "hook."

MAKE YOUR PITCH UNIQUE AND INFORMATIVE

One critical fact you should keep in mind about the media: their coverage is shaped not only by what is newsworthy, but also by what will appeal to the broadest cross-section of people. They are on the lookout for unique stories with human interest and emotional appeal, and for startling but relevant information. They won't be interested in anything that seems self-serving or purely promotional, or something that simply serves to air your group's opinions on school reform.

If, for example, your issue is charter schools, focus on providing the media with the facts and examples about how and why charters work. Equally as important, point them in the direction of tangible, unusual examples of the charter concept in action — a teacher helping children learn in a new and exciting environment or a parent giving volunteer time to help make it happen. Put a human face on the facts and figures. If you don't have charters yet, but want the option for your community, illustrate the need with personal struggles: of the local teacher unable to do what he thinks is best in his classroom, of the children whose needs are no longer met by their assigned schools, or of the principal unable to release a disgruntled teacher.

Seek out the stories which are unique to your area but haven't yet received proper attention. Perhaps a local school board official has had a glimpse at some poorly managed aspect of the schools. Perhaps there is an example where money is not being spent responsibly — students stuck with outdated textbooks while the central office hires ten more staff members. The issues facing the schools are broad, and there are strong, concrete reasons why you have your

particular agenda. Use the facts and examples to justify your reasons and support your agenda, not the other way around. The key to making your message known and winning people over — including the media — is in showing why you believe what you believe with real life examples, not with theory. You must draw a picture of what things are like, and what they could be like. If less than half of the kids in your local school are graduating with basic history knowledge, tell that story. If parents who ask to see the curriculum at a school are turned away by the principal, tell that, too.

Throughout the pages of this handbook, we've included real-life anecdotes and personal stories about good people doing good things and special interest groups trying to stand in their way. These have been included for your use and for your reference. Add to them your own local stories, and tell them to everyone you see. Most important, tell them to the media.

With the media, as with anyone you are trying to inform or influence, you must show that you know what's going on before you will be taken seriously. You must be sure that the stories you use are factual and can be verified. Do not share rumor with the press — it will put a quick end to any credibility or substantial future contact you could have with them. Remember, the reporter's name appears on her articles, her face and voice is on the television newscast. Each has a reputation to uphold and to build, and bad information compromises that.

A note on getting quoted: Always include in your news releases, perhaps lead with, a quote by your organization's leader, spokesperson or a recognized board member or supporter. Reporters are interested in giving all sides of a story, but they're also working against a deadline. Under such time constraints, they may not get a chance to call every source they want, and your news release or media alert may be the only contact they have with you. If you can provide them with a ready-made statement or mini-interview in the form of a news release, you'll be helping them get the whole story and, you'll increase your chances of being quoted or named as a source. With that in mind, make sure your quotes are informative, brief and catchy. Also, give credit to and quote from your information sources — it will reinforce that the issues are not far beyond your group and community.

Always continue broadening your network of incoming information, and you will soon become a valuable source of breaking news. For example, many organizations including The Center for Education Reform, the publisher of this handbook, send out media alerts and policy advisories to grass roots groups and other organizations to inform them about new and pressing developments in education reform. Go back to the list of national and regional organizations you assembled when you started to build your coalition and make sure you are on their mailing lists for policy papers and press releases; once aware of your education interests, they'll soon be sending a full supply of information from which you can pull.

TALKING TO THE PRESS

There are a few important rules of thumb to follow if you're giving an interview or if you are called to comment on an issue or event. The first rule is always be prepared. In fact, every time you talk in public about your group's purpose and goals, think of it as an interview with the press. Being prepared is the most important part of doing your job.

That is why your constant goal should be to arm yourself with the facts and examples that support your positions. For each particular occasion, consider who your audience will be — local elected leaders, state school officials, parents, voters, educators — and prepare with their interests in mind. In a media interview, think about who will be reading that article or watching that program, and address their concerns. Focus your answers or your comments on what they would find interesting or noteworthy.

Prepare information in brief sentences or 'sound bites.' Out of a fifteen minute conversation, a reporter may use only a brief sentence or ten seconds of dialogue. Your chances of getting quoted are far greater if you give them brief statements that convey relevant information.

Be creative, but to the point. Use easy-to-grasp statistics, but don't confuse the point with too many numbers. Make your point, use an example or statistic to back it up, and move on to your next point. In a question and answer situation, answer the question fully, but don't ramble on. Know in advance what information you want to get across and don't get backed into a corner by narrow questions. If you feel uncomfortable or unprepared to answer a particularly pointed remark, use the question as an opportunity to make your own statement on a related issue. For example, if you are asked about funding for a multicultural curriculum, but are not certain about the details, respond by pointing out that the real issue is that x% of the district's budget never even makes it to the classroom level.

Become a referral source for information that may not be directly in your line of expertise. If you are able to direct reporters to other sources — both local and national — you'll be doing them a service that they will not forget, which will boost your credibility and increase your coverage down the line. In the case of our charter school example, when you're discussing the topic with a reporter, offer to put him or her in touch with a charter school principal in a neighboring state or with the legislator who wrote particularly good charter legislation that was just passed in another.

Always be mindful that reporters are usually working under a deadline. If they call you on Monday, the story may be scheduled for Tuesday's paper. If you missed their call, call back as soon as you get the message. If you promise to get them information, get it to them ASAP. If there has been a delay, call to let them know. And if you can't get it after all, by all means, call right away so they can keep looking. Never promise what you can't deliver — instead steer them to another source. If you leave them hanging, next time they will call elsewhere; in

the process they may very well find a new, more reliable permanent source than you.

Don't say something that you would not want to see in print or hear repeated on the air. If there is something you want to say that you do not want quoted, tell them you are going "off the record" before you start, or tell them you'd be happy to talk to them "on background only." This kind of information can be just as good to reporters, if not better, than your live quote. And there is an unwritten code of ethics that the vast majority of reporters do respect when it comes to using such information.

When you provide your views on education reform, remember to tell the reporters that this is not an issue on which you stand alone. Although your group may be small or your name may be new to the reporter, let her know that many, many other people are working on similar issues around the country. Whether the issue is testing, school choice, teacher reforms or money, there are an abundance of people, statistics, and case studies to support the reforms discussed throughout the School Reform Handbook. Give your reporter the big picture — give examples of the specific leaders and organizations supporting these issues in other states and on the national level, including educators whenever possible, and stress the political and social diversity of these reformers. This will help you avoid being wrongly typecast as politically or socially narrow — or as just a lone voice on a doomed mission. (See Chapter 9, "The Irony of Education Reform," for further discussion.)

EDITORIAL BOARD MEETINGS

In addition to meeting individually with reporters, you should set up informal discussions with editorial boards. Contact editorial page editors and tell them you want to come by at their convenience to inform them about your new group, your work or a local issue. If they can't give you a time and date for an initial meeting, tell them you'll call back when their schedule is freer. To entice them to take the meeting, you might consider bringing along a high profile supporter as a "drawing card" — but make sure you are in basic agreement about the issues to be discussed. Whatever it takes to get a meeting, remember, you must work with the press on THEIR terms, not yours.

Approach an editorial board meeting much as you would treat a one-on-one interview. Here, however, you will have the chance to flesh out the issues more broadly, to open up a dialogue and more fully present your point of view. If you find that those present are not sympathetic to your views, all is not lost; simply acknowledge that you might not see eye-to-eye on everything, and offer to keep in touch and provide regular information to them. You can still be of help to them, they will appreciate your candor, and you have left the door open for meetings at a later date.

On the surface, many in the local media may have the wrong impression of your group, precisely because of the depiction given by your opponents in the unions and elsewhere. Nothing counteracts such bad press as showing the

media that you are part of the community, out there working for kids and schools. Write complimentary letters to chosen reporters when they report well. Call them personally when you disagree, or write a diplomatic note to the same effect. After such initial correspondence, call them to invite them for coffee with you or to address your group about education and their role in the media. Building alliances will have more far-reaching consequences than sitting back and criticizing the press.

PUBLICIZING YOUR ORGANIZATION OR EVENT

One of the best ways to draw the media's attention to the issues is to hold public forums that they can attend or even participate in. Always let the media know about any meeting, informal or formal, that you would be willing to have them attend. It doesn't matter how large or small the event: the squeaky wheel gets the grease. The more you contact them, the better chance you stand of getting press coverage.

In addition, the media can be helpful in publicizing your event to the public at large. The following is a basic plan for getting both publicity and reporting:

* **Media or Daybook Advisory:** these one-page information sheets tell the media who, what, where and when. Send them out 2-6 weeks before the event and again one week before. Be sure to include a contact name and number. Some media outlets keep a daybook which the press and public can scan to see what events are going on. In addition to informing your regular press contact list, be sure to get into a media outlet's daybook.

* **Calendar of Events:** Know ahead which publications do calendars of community events and what day and time of the month those are published. Be sure to make their deadlines, and always provide a contact number for more information.

* **Story Pitch:** Find a hook and make a personal call to a friendly reporter to pitch a story that ties in with your event. Perhaps a parent or teacher is going to tell her particular story, or a national figure is speaking or coming to offer his support. Do not underestimate the power of a noteworthy or human-interest hook to bring in a friendly reporter. But be sure to pitch them the story you want to see. Do not leave it up to chance that they understand why you are calling.

* **News Release:** This is a timely, more detailed communication with the media. To follow up your media advisories, send out a news release for any event you hold, to be delivered or faxed the evening before the event, as well as distributed at the event. As with all communications, be clear and to the point. Include new or noteworthy information, the local implications of the story, and quotes from you or members of the community on the subject.

A NOTE ON PRESS CONFERENCES

You can use press conferences to announce: the official formation of your organization; the results of research conducted or sponsored by your organization; policy or legislative changes supported by your group; or any other significant development your organization has been involved with. Hold the press conference at a symbolic or significant location, preferably in the morning so that the media can run your story on the evening news or in the next day's paper. In addition to getting out the media advisory and the news release, call all your press contacts by 9 a.m. on the day of the conference to confirm that they're coming.

Be judicious in calling press conferences. Remember that news releases can be used very effectively on their own to inform the media, via fax or mail, about a breaking story. Don't hold a press conference if a news release and a few personal phone calls will get you equal or better results.

A NOTE ON TALK RADIO

Every broadcast area airs both national and local radio talk shows. They have a lot of airtime to fill and many local and regional shows continually search for interesting guests or unusual stories. Some may be very sympathetic to your efforts, while others may not. Pitch talk show hosts of both leanings, and get to know their producers — use the kinds of media efforts discussed above. In setting up radio broadcasts, it is important to objectively consider who in your organization is best qualified to speak in this forum; give consideration to speaking voice and conversational manner. Be honest: if it is not you, then act as the booking agent and let someone else do the interview. While you do not have to sound exciting to do a solid print interview, or even to give an effective TV sound bite, in the extended-time format of radio, you do have to sound better than the average speaker if you want to win over listeners. The main thing to remember is that you always want to be putting your organization's best foot forward.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR AND OP-EDS

Take full advantage of newspaper opportunities to voice your opinion or make your group known. You can use "Letters to the Editor" to clarify any press coverage about your group that may not have been clear or accurate, or to present more facts or alternative views to a newspaper report or editorial.

If you are responding to something already printed in the newspaper begin your "Letter to the Editor" with a reference to the article, including the article's headline and date. For example: "In your piece 'Shortchanging the Students,' January 2, 1995,...." You should present your main point in the first paragraph of the letter, then offer evidence to support your view in the body of the letter. The entire effort should be no more than two pages in length, and preferably only one.

Be sure to sign your name, and include all of your phone numbers, as the newspaper will want to verify that you wrote the letter. Use letterhead if you're writing on behalf of your group.

The opinion editorial, or op-ed, provides a larger forum for you to discuss your views about education reform or a more specific education issue. The chances of getting an op-ed placed in a newspaper increase greatly if it comes from a respected member of the community or someone involved directly with the schools. Try to enlist these people on your behalf. You can either have them write the piece themselves, if they are willing and able; you can ghostwrite it for their signature; or you can co-author it to appear under both your names.

The op-ed should be made up of brief paragraphs explaining the issue. To support your point of view use quotes of respected local leaders and recognized authorities, include relevant facts or statistics, and link the issue to local news or events. Below the signature line include a one sentence description of the author or authors and, if appropriate, their title and the group with which they are affiliated. Op-Eds should be no more than 600 to 700 words in length, always submitted with a title and double-spaced.

Use your coalition and media contacts to "shop," or sell, the op-ed to various print outlets, and ask some of your organizational friends to make contacts on your behalf. If you are not able to establish personal contact, you will need to send the piece with a cover letter briefly explaining the subject of the op-ed and its relevance to the paper or magazine's audience. Even if you are sending the piece "cold," to someone who doesn't know you, try to establish at least some contact in the editorial department so they'll know it's coming. Then be sure to follow-up with that person after you've sent it to make sure they've received it.

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You may not always be successful, and you may have to try a dozen times or more, but with persistence you will get your views into the media and out to the public at large.

* Adapted from CER's 1995 book *The School Reform Handbook* by Jeanne Allen.