

PROTECTING A SCHOOL'S REPUTATION
Reputation Risk Management Strategies for Heads of Independent Schools
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- ✓ Maintain a policy of “bad news first.” Make it safe for students and faculty to tell you what’s really going on.
- ✓ Make a list of all the things that could go wrong. Meet regularly with key staff to review and add to the list. Read the papers, watch television news, and talk to your peers – what has gone wrong at other schools should be on *your* list.
- ✓ For each thing that could go wrong, make a corresponding list of what you do right. This becomes your defense, and the basis for your key messages in a time of crisis. Up to date statistics and fact sheets that reflect your track record in key areas (e.g. financial aid, diversity, academic achievement, fundraising, and faculty hiring) demonstrate that you’re on the ball.
- ✓ Make sure your key constituents know what you do right. Keep them informed of your safeguards, policies, and procedures.
- ✓ Adopt a press policy to guide students and faculty who may be questioned by the press (if you don’t have one already) and make sure students, parents, faculty members, and trustees know what it says. Have it ready for any reporter who shows up at your door. A good press policy protects not only the school – but the students as well.
- ✓ Maintain good relations with state regulators, local selectmen, and police and fire officials. Make sure they know you support their efforts (by involving the school in community activities) and respect their regulations. Make sure all health/safety codes are met and related inspections are up to date. In a time of crisis, the press will look for them to pile on. You may need these people to comment positively about the way you manage your school – and this relationship building will give them reason to want to help you.
- ✓ Line up parents and other third parties who would be willing to go to bat for you in a public way (e.g. be quoted in newspapers, write letters to the editor). Third party endorsements and testimonials are critical.
- ✓ Give reporters reason to like you. Invite those who cover your school to meet with you now and then - one on one or as a group. Include the editor of your own student newspaper. Tell them what you’re up to. Find out what they care about. Build a relationship and a reservoir of goodwill with each of them.
- ✓ Decide who your spokesperson will be in a time of crisis and speak with that one voice. Your spokesperson shouldn’t be your school head – nor should it be your school’s attorney. It shouldn’t be anyone who might be perceived to be shifting blame or protecting his or her own reputation in the context of a firestorm. Line up a professionally trained reputation risk manager to protect you, in the same way that you have an insurance policy in place to cover liability or damage to school property. Keep that person informed of developments, what you do right, what questions have been raised, what disciplinary actions have come down and where trouble might be brewing.

Press Policy for Independent Schools
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An effective school press policy is one that imposes a degree of discipline over the process by which the media gains access and information. In particular, a good press policy:

- Demonstrates respect for journalists and the job they are paid to do;
- Makes sense to the people whose conduct it is intended to influence;
- Protects students from talking to reporters without adult intervention / guidance;
- Ensures that the press get the most current information about the subject at hand;
- Ensures that the press hears from the school's most knowledgeable source on a particular subject;
- Prevents public statements from faculty who may not be aware that the school has chosen to remain silent about a particular matter;
- Prevents public statements from faculty or administrators that do damage to a particular strategy, or to relationships in the community
- Prevents the sharing of confidential or proprietary information, and
- Takes advantage of media interest to put the school in the best possible light and to promote other agendas.

To promote positive and productive press relations therefore, schools are urged to maintain the following procedures when responding to reporters' inquiries:

1. Maintain a single point of contact for all media inquiries. That person should screen all calls to identify if the school will respond to a particular line of inquiry, and if so, who is the best person to respond on behalf of the school.
2. School heads should be advised that a press inquiry has come in, and what the recommended course of action will be. This gives the head the opportunity to inform the 'screener' of any recent developments that would suggest an alternative strategy.
3. If a faculty member gets a call directly from a reporter, he or she should have the 'screener' or school spokesperson return the call to ascertain the nature of the inquiry – and follow the same procedure as described above.
4. To the extent possible, the head should serve as spokesperson about all good news. An experienced media relations professional should serve as spokesperson for all bad news. If there is any doubt as to whom the reporter should talk to, err on the side of caution. Consult with an experienced professional.
5. Require students to have written parental consent before speaking to any reporter on any subject viewed to be of a controversial nature. A parent should submit a letter that indicates awareness of the specific subject matter about which his or her son or daughter is being asked to speak, and then, grants permission to do so.

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Sample Request for Parental Permission for Student Participation in School-Related News

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Your son or daughter may be involved in School activities or receive awards that are of interest to local journalists. Further, from time to time, the School distributes news releases to publicize the accomplishments of our students. May we include your son or daughter's name, and home city or town in School-generated news releases?

Yes No

May we use your son or daughter's name and/or photograph in print and/or electronic publications issued by the School?

Yes No

Journalists covering School-related news sometimes ask to contact the student or his or her parents at home. If that happens, we will call you so that you may return the call at your discretion. It is School policy not to release the address or telephone number of any person associated with the School.

Signature of parent or guardian: _____ Date: _____

Child's Name: _____ Year of graduation: _____

Media Policy Governing Student Participation in Self-Initiated Interviews or Interviews Sought by Journalists Covering News about the School

Parents and students should be aware of the School's policy governing student participation in press interviews about the school or any of its students, faculty or programs.

Students are free to talk to the press about any issue affecting the School, but only with the written permission of a parent in each instance.

Any parent who wishes to grant permission may do so by sending a note, by email, fax, or US mail, to [the School's press or public relations officer], indicating the name of the journalist seeking the interview, the publication for which he or she writes, and the general subject matter expected to be discussed.

This press policy exists for the protection of students who may not fully appreciate the consequences of statements they make to the press. It is intended to encourage dialogue with parents and other adults who can provide perspective and advice. The School is not responsible for any statements made by students to the press, or any consequences arising from such statements.