

Appendix B: Working with the Media

Media Dos and Don'ts on Data

- **Do** make sure your district has a comprehensive communications plan that addresses the release of potentially controversial data such as test scores, dropout rates, teacher quality ratings, school safety reports and other indicators.
- **Don't** wait until the day test scores are released to deepen the media's understanding about what the tests measure, how the district will use the test scores and what the results tell parents and community members. This should be an ongoing process. Be proactive. Keep the media informed. Make an occasional courtesy call even when you don't have to.
- **Do** make sure staff is apprised of test results and other sensitive data before the media, so everyone is focused on the same messages. For example, if the state releases test scores one day before the scores are released publicly, hold meetings with teachers, principals and other district staff to inform them of the results.
- **Don't** hide data from reporters. It's public information.
- **Do** talk to the reporter first when inaccuracies surface in a story, such as factually incorrect data or scores. Make sure you have documentation to back up your claim. If problems continue, contact the reporter's editor.
- **Don't** neglect to share what is working in the district. Suggest feature stories that show trends in school improvement backed by data.

Interview Techniques: How to Handle Tough Media Interviews on Data

Needling

Reporter: “Oh, come on now, you don’t believe trend data show improvements in teacher quality do you?”

Superintendent: “Yes, I do, Beth, and... .” Go on to your key message.

Twisted Facts

Reporter: “So your test scores are down again.” (When, in fact, the test has changed or a new population of students is tested.)

Superintendent: “Let’s be clear about what the data tell us... .”

False Assumption

Reporter: “So I assume you are going to spend taxpayer money to purchase a new test since this one shows bad results... .”

Superintendent: “Well, Mike, I wouldn’t agree with your conclusion.” Steer the interview back on message.

Baiting

Reporter: “So why does this community keep attacking your initiatives?”

Superintendent: “You’ll have to talk directly to those who raise concerns. What I can tell you is that our district is dedicated to... .” (Discuss public engagement efforts to gather and respond to community input.)

Pregnant Pause

Reporter: The reporter remains silent after you answer a question.

Superintendent: Do not rush to fill in the silence. Wait for the reporter to follow-up or ask, “Does that answer your question?”

Loaded Question

Reporter: “You don’t deny that the district knew all along about sagging test scores and refused to do anything about it.”

Superintendent: “Here’s what we have done to improve low-performing schools... . Here’s what has worked and where we need to improve... .”

Adapted from a Michigan School Boards Association media slide presentation.