

## Talking to the Media

The public gets most of its information about education from two primary sources: (1) educators and others with first-hand knowledge about what is happening in schools and (2) print and electronic news media. Therefore, it is critical that college- and career-ready advocates effectively engage with the media and that the media be knowledgeable about your agenda. The decline of print media—newspapers and magazines—and the explosion of the blogosphere and the 24/7/365 news cycle mean that education reporters have less time and more stories competing for space than ever before. And education may not be a reporter’s sole focus or even their area of expertise; in many markets, education reporters often cover multiple beats.

So, how do you ensure your agenda gets (earned) media coverage in a changing news environment that makes it more challenging than ever to advance your messages? Engaging the media requires shaping a story that is immediate, interesting and informative. Be prepared to talk about what’s really new in college and career readiness in your state (e.g., Common Core State Standards, new dual enrollment programs), get to the heart of the issue with a minimum amount of education-speak lingo, share compelling data that back up your point and have credible and interesting people ready that reporters will want to interview.

When it comes to telling the story about college- and career-ready policies and initiatives, some of the most effective vehicles for garnering media attention include:

**Earning your “earned media” coverage.** “Earned” media coverage doesn’t just happen; it really does have to be “earned.” Identifying what the media needs to know, gathering human-interest stories that capture the heart of the matter, and validating what the research and stories say through spokespeople whom the media find particularly credible are all good strategies. Be creative, pick unusual spokespeople and venues. Remember, the first criterion for earning media coverage is to say something newsworthy.

Examples of events or stories that may help you earn media coverage include:

- Release research, data and analyses such as trend reports for your state that gauge what students know compared with basic expectations for college and career readiness. Know, for example, remediation rates at local two- and four-year institutions in your state as well as college completion rates. Incorporate data from business groups in your state when discussing workplace readiness. Show why college- and career-ready policies and initiatives are important for your city, community and state. Speak boldly about the consequences of inaction (or reversal of action) and have credible and well-known messengers.
- Develop and disseminate “myth-buster” pieces that answer critics’ concerns and charges. Present the facts behind the new and proposed college- and career-ready policies. Why are these changes beneficial? According to whom? Who will be affected and how? Who will be hurt and helped?
- Address publicly the real concerns of those who oppose college- and career-ready changes. How will you support students to ensure that they are ready for next-generation assessments? What kinds of professional development and supports are you providing for teachers? Do you have “strange bedfellows” supporting these efforts? Bringing them together for an event is sure to draw media attention. This is also important to convey as it will demonstrate to potential readers that you are not ignoring the real challenges related to the agenda, but rather have thought them through and are willing to address them publicly.
- Celebrate successes. Where there are signs of success—improved college-going rates in a previously struggling school, more students taking advanced courses, improved achievement among minority

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and disadvantaged kids—get the word out. Connect successes with the college- and career-ready policy agenda. If you have a success story, you have news. Tell everyone.

- Make college and career readiness personal. Prepare a profile (print or multimedia) of a student or school that has been positively impacted by your policy changes. Journalists are always looking for ways to localize and humanize their stories, so any help you can provide them will improve your odds of placement.

**Hosting briefings and events for reporters and editors.** Speaking with reporters who cover education on a regular basis by periodically hosting briefings and events will enable you to develop relationships and become a trusted source of information. Consider reaching out to members of both traditional media and new media when holding these events.

- Hold news events that release useful information (e.g. major reports) and showcase interesting spokespeople and points of view, such as political and community leaders, students, college faculty, business owners and labor leaders.
- Conduct regional or statewide media tours in which key spokespeople sit down with reporters and editors to outline the college- and career-ready agenda, preview new research or reports, and discuss implications of new policies and practices for their readers/listeners/viewers.
- Remember, not every event needs to be large: monthly roundtable briefings—in person or by phone—with a small group of key reporters and a guest speaker that highlight a new report, new data or a new angle will keep college and career readiness front and center. Consistency is key.
- Plan editorial board visits. In addition to engaging reporters, it can also be effective to directly reach out to the editorial boards of statewide and local newspapers to provide key background and context for the college- and career-ready reforms. By ensuring editorial staff understand the why and how of the reforms upfront, you can prevent a media backlash when implementation becomes challenging, or, in the case of implementing more rigorous standards and assessments, students' scores go down initially. It's easiest to have these scheduled if a prominent leader is part of the visits (e.g., the governor, a CEO, etc.)

**Garnering public statements and endorsements by state and local leaders.** Who are the important public figures in your state, or, asked another way, who are the credible messengers for college and career readiness? From policymakers and opinion leaders to well-known celebrities and beloved public figures, if they support you, make sure the public knows it. Some of the best ways to get the word out include:

- Opinion pieces, letters to the editors or blog posts by prominent public figures (college presidents, CEOs, economists, community leaders, sports figures, your state's teacher of the year) can create a sense of urgency about the college- and career-ready agenda (why it is important, why now); advocate for particular policy options (what can/should be done to boost readiness); and speak to the value of doing something—or the consequences of doing nothing.
- Encourage supporters—public figures and private citizens—to use their bully pulpit (from the State of the State to local chamber meetings) to speak out on behalf of your agenda. The more voices delivering the same message, the better.
- Make sure that everyone in your state knows and uses your “key three” messages on college and career readiness. Make talking points, fact sheets and other supportive materials available to all.

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**Don't forget about social media.** While media engagement has traditionally focused on print, radio and television, increasingly individuals are getting their news from blogs and Twitter feeds. When hosting a media roundtable or sending out press releases, make sure to include prominent education bloggers and writers on your list (be them parents, teachers, or other advocates adding to the education reform discussion) to the table. Not only will this help get your message out, it could also prevent backlash if these social media newsmakers feel they have been left out of the loop.