

NEWS MEDIA RELATIONS GUIDELINES

Introduction

The Pittsburgh Public Schools is committed to honest, transparent, and consistent communication with our stakeholders. We understand that maintaining open, two-way communication with stakeholders is essential for building relationships. We have diverse outreach needs and know that strong relationships are the foundation for a successful school system.

The purpose of the Pittsburgh Public Schools News Media Relations Guidelines is to present a clear and concise framework for communicating with both internal and external audiences in our school community. Providing frequent, clear, and results-driven communications is key to building trust and loyalty to the School District. These guidelines are aligned with School District goals, designed to be both proactive and interactive, and will be reviewed annually for effectiveness.

The success of the Pittsburgh Public Schools News Media Relations Guidelines depends heavily on the support and involvement of all staff members. Communication is a part of every job in our School District. Planning for and requiring shared responsibility will ensure that the entire organization is dedicated to delivering a timely, unified message to the appropriate audiences.

Objectives

The School District of Pittsburgh has a fundamental responsibility to inform the public about its educational mission, initiatives, and accomplishments. In addition, the School District recognizes that the maintenance of good working relationships with media representatives is essential to prevent the spread of inaccurate or biased information.

The School District is therefore committed to a culture of openness with the news media, and to the broad release of timely and accurate information on issues and events of public importance. To that end, the School District expects all of its employees to abide by the following set of principles:

- Be honest and accurate in all communications with members of the media and public

- Respect the First Amendment rights of all reporters and citizens
- Respond as promptly as possible to media requests and inquiries
- Efficiently expedite responses to requests for general information in order to meet reasonable or requested deadlines
- Coordinate the public release of information with the Department of Public Relations
- Protect the private, confidential information of students and families from unlawful public disclosure

Scope

This document provides guidance on the provision of information in any form to news and information media, including (but not limited to) interviews, press releases, media advisories, letters to the editor, opinion or editorial columns, and internet postings used to convey news or items of public interest. These guidelines are applicable to all persons employed by the School District.

Director of Public Relations and Media Content

The Director of Public Relations and Media Content (“Director of Public Relations”) is the principal point of contact for news media inquiries about the School District and its constituent schools.

The Director of Public Relations or their designee is responsible for:

- Conducting and coordinating news media relations for the School District
- Ensuring timely release and efficient dissemination of materials and information to news media
- Coordinating and reviewing the performance of all news media relations activities
- Clearing news media releases, activities, events, and materials

General Guidelines

The School District seeks to provide the widest practical and appropriate dissemination of information concerning its activities, programs, and achievements. News media requests for public information concerning the School District should be addressed promptly, factually, and as completely as possible, in accordance with applicable laws protecting the privacy of students and families.

Press/News Releases

All School District press releases shall be available to any member of the media who wishes to receive them. Any reporter may contact the Office of Public Relations to be placed on a distribution list for press releases. In addition, the Office of Public Relations shall post press releases to the School District's website or social media accounts.

Definitions:

Media Briefing – an event, whether in-person or virtually – in which an official or designated spokesperson invites journalists to receive a significant announcement or information update of interest to the public.

News Conference – an event that is open to the public and accessible either in-person or via livestream that might include an expanded roster of speakers to present the information and will typically offer greater opportunity for journalists to ask questions or explore broader topics. It might also feature opportunities such as a facility tour or demonstration.

Public News Conferences, Meetings, and Events

From time to time the Superintendent, the Director of Public Relations, or their designee may hold news conferences in person or virtually, especially in response to issues that require the quick dissemination of information. The School District encourages News Directors/Editors to assign the most appropriate journalist and/or photographer to report on noteworthy news and current events related to the School District, however any reporter affiliated with an established media outlet may contact the Director of Public Relations to be placed on a list of journalists to be contacted with announcements of such news conferences. In addition, the Director of Public Relations or their designee shall make advance announcements of public news conferences via the School District's website or social media accounts when time permits.

News conferences are designed to provide critical information, context and clarity about newsworthy topics to the media, subject only to any limitations related to the size or security needs of the forum or platform. Beat reporters, especially those that specialize in education, build up a base of knowledge and gain familiarity that allows them to provide the most effective insight and commentary. However, access to such events shall not be restricted based on the reporter's actual or perceived viewpoint, race, ethnicity, country of origin, religion, sexual orientation, or sexual identity of the journalist seeking to attend.

To request meeting details, interested journalists may submit media credentials to the Director of Public Relations or their designee.

Press Operations: Credentials

To ensure the safety of students and staff, the School District requires all media to submit a press credentials request at the start of each school year. The request will be reviewed and an appropriate press pass will be issued once the media outlet has been approved. The following

guidelines will help our media partners obtain desired information and interviews while maintaining order and providing for the safety and security of all those in attendance of School District news conferences, meetings and events.

Eligibility for press credentials is restricted to those journalists, freelancers, bloggers, and other public writers who either:

- Have reported on education and its diverse issues for at least four months from the time of request. Or,
- Are working for or contracted by a media organization or platform with evidence of a history of reporting on issues related to education.

Pittsburgh Public Schools reserves the right to limit the number of credentials approved based on facility-imposed restrictions and/or any public health related restrictions.

Pittsburgh Public Schools reserves the right to deny press credentials to anyone at any time.

Interviews and Briefings

The Superintendent, the Director of Public Relations, or their designee may also from time to time participate in briefings with a single reporter or a small group of reporters. Any journalist or group of journalists who wish to request such an interview or briefing may contact the Director of Public Relations.

The Director of Public Relations or their designee shall be the initial point of contact for all media inquiries and requests for interviews of or briefings with the Superintendent, Board Directors, School District employees, students, and families. Any School District employee who receives a media inquiry or request for interview or briefing shall refer the request to the Director of Public Relations.

Access to School District Employees, Students, and Families

Where appropriate, the Director of Public Relations may refer media inquiries and requests for interviews to a principal, teacher, or other School District employee. Upon receiving such a referral, the employee is encouraged but not required to participate in the requested interview.

With the consent of the student and their parent or guardian, the Director of Public Relations may also refer media inquiries and requests for interviews to a student or family member who wishes to participate in the response or interview.

No School District teacher or student shall participate in a media interview during school hours unless the principal of the school determines that doing so will not interfere with educational activities.

Student and Family Privacy

Pittsburgh Public Schools is committed to maintaining a safe, secure, and positive learning environment with clear academic goals and high expectations for all of our students. We take the safety and privacy of our students, teachers, and all School District personnel very seriously.

The School District is committed to protecting and respecting the privacy of its students and their families. As more fully explained in the School District's Student Records Guidelines (No. 210-AR-1 of 3), the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) generally prohibits the release of students' records (which may include certain photographs and videos of students) without consent. Under no circumstances will such records be released except in compliance with the Student Records Guidelines.

The School District will make every reasonable effort to provide information which is a matter of public record to media outlets when and if it becomes available and is in compliance with State and Federal law, specifically but not limited to Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA), both of which can be accessed at the U.S. Department of Education website at www.ed.gov

Matters of Criminal Investigation

In the event that any incident involves a formal investigation, the School District will defer all comments to the investigating agency and/or the School District's Solicitor, including but not limited to, local, state and federal law enforcement, and fire departments. In addition, the School District does not provide comment to the media regarding any active litigation.

Letters to the Editor and Opinion-Editorial Columns

Employees' letters to the editor and opinion-editorial (op-ed) columns, if designed to represent an official School District or school response or view, or if the author is writing as part of their official responsibilities, must be cleared in advance with the Director of Public Relations.

Organized Media Events

All organized media events sponsored by the School District or a constituent school require approval by the Director of Public Relations. Participation by School District representatives in organized media events sponsored by other government, private sector, or non-profit organizations must be cleared and coordinated with the Director of Public Relations.

Unsolicited News Media Statements by School District Employees

Any School District employee who wishes to make an unsolicited statement to the news media, in their capacity as a School District employee, shall first obtain the permission of the Superintendent, the Director of Public Relations, or their designee. This is a requirement regardless of whether the proposed statement is to be made on the record, off the record, on background, or on deep background as those terms are defined below:

- On the record: All statements are directly quotable and attributable, by name and title, to the person making the statement.

- Off the Record: Information is for the reporter's use only and is not to be printed or made public in any way.
- On Background: All statements are directly quotable, but cannot be attributed by name or specific title to the person commenting.
- On Deep Background: Anything that is said in the interview is usable but not in direct quotation and not for attribution. The reporter writes it on their own.

Nothing in these guidelines is intended to prohibit School District employees from speaking to reporters in their capacity as private citizens on matters of public concern, where doing so does not interfere with the employee's job duties for the School District. However, employees who present personal or individual views must make clear that they are presenting their personal views—not the views of the School District or a particular school—and they should not be sourced as a representative of the School District or a particular school, or make reference to their official title or position in the piece. This provision includes authorship of letters to the editors and opinion-editorial columns. In addition, such letters to the editors or opinion-editorial columns should not be provided on School District or school letterhead.

Violation of Trust (Media)

We are committed to fairness, even if a journalist's coverage promotes a critical view of the School District's priorities, practices and accomplishments. We believe fairness involves completeness, relevance and honesty, and that effective media relations is built on trust. These policies govern the School District's approach to providing access and accurate information and articulates our standards and expectations of honesty, accuracy and fairness in newsgathering. When there is a violation of the trust between the School District and the news media, public confidence in the news and information about the School District is diminished. Therefore, when the School District deems there is a violation of trust in the process of newsgathering or there is a misuse or misrepresentation of credentials, the Superintendent or the Office of Public Relations will first seek a remedy with the editors of the news outlet, including reassignment of staff. If the parties cannot agree on a remedy, additional steps may be taken by the School District in consultation with the School District's Solicitor.

Social Media Guidelines

While the scope of these guidelines concerns communications with the news media, School District employees are also reminded that their compliance with the School District's social medial guidelines, outlined in the School and Community Relations Administrative Regulations 1001, is also expected.