



## Working with weekly newspapers

Most Alberta school boards are in a community where a weekly newspaper is the main source for news. What's the best way to connect with your weekly paper and ensure your message is delivered to the readers?

### Here are tips to build a relationship with your local weekly paper.

#### Meet the editor

Staff turnover at Alberta weekly newspapers can be high so it's best to call the editor every six months and ask how you can help facilitate education news stories.

- At the jurisdiction level, plan to meet the editor and review upcoming issues to ensure staff at the paper understand what may be coming up. The editor may or may not be covering the education beat. However, he or she is the person who assigns stories and photos and reviews the copy before it is printed, so the editor needs to understand the issues.
- At the school level, principals may extend an invitation to the editor to meet school staff. Propose a tour of the school to the newspaper staff so reporters can see first-hand what programs are offered.

#### Provide a package prior to a board meeting

Give reporters a full agenda package, including back-up material, one or two days before a board meeting. This will give reporters time to sift through the paper and to decide if they need to ask further questions about an issue following the meeting. The package is also an opportunity for the board to ask if the media needs any more information on agenda items. Offer to walk reporters through information to be sure they have a good grasp of the issues.

- Make covering your board meetings as easy as possible for reporters. If you are presenting a prepared statement on a controversial issue, for example, make copies available to the media. It may be helpful to provide fact sheets or a chronology of events for background information. Brief reporters about complex issues ahead of the meeting.
- Consider reporters' schedules. If possible, tell reporters how long an *in-camera* session may last. If they know it may be more than 30 minutes, they may opt to use that time to take a photo or fit in an interview for another story.
- Take time to meet reporters who are assigned to your jurisdiction. If you notice a new reporter at a school board meeting, introduce yourself, provide him or her your telephone number and show an interest in the reporter as an individual.
- Set aside a table for reporters at the meeting so they have an area to take notes.

#### Share your school event calendar

Sending a monthly school calendar of upcoming events will help community newspapers plan their coverage ahead of time. Don't forget that you are competing for space in the paper with other local events and stories. School newsletters are a source of story ideas for editors. Make sure the paper is on your mailing or e-mail list. Newsletter stories could potentially pique an editor's interest (such as insight into the D.A.R.E. program or an introduction of a new teacher).

#### Offer to send photos

Ask the editor if he or she would like photos of events sent by e-mail. Reporters have tight schedules, work nights and weekends and are interviewing, researching and writing up to 15 stories a week. Providing a photo with all the necessary information (ensure that FOIPP is covered) will save time for the newspaper staff and be appreciated, especially if it is a creative photo.



# Communications Now

## Propose a monthly column

Suggest to the editor that the jurisdiction submit a column every month. Columns could introduce the trustees, describe the role of the school board, new jurisdiction programs, highlight the three-year plan or update what schools are working on. The editor and the school board contact could work together to outline stories for the year.

At the school level, a student could write a monthly column. Many weekly newspapers are seeking more youth readers and are eager to reach out to this audience. Team up with the newspaper to hold a writing contest for junior or senior high students. The contest winner gains writing experience and a portfolio for future career opportunities. The jurisdiction or the school gains exposure in the community.

## Story tips are an editor's friend

Keep the newspaper in the loop for possible stories.

- School boards, schools and newspapers all have the same goal – to connect with readers or residents of their community.
- Find stories in your schools that have a human angle or provide a face to a program. Perhaps a student is volunteering at a seniors' centre and deserves recognition. A teacher could be going to Africa during the summer to work with AIDS patients. Share the success stories.
- You know best the activities that are taking place in your schools. The newspaper staff won't know about these stories unless you tell them.
- Let editors or reporters know they can call you if they have a slow news day. You may have something – keep a file of possible stories handy with contact names and numbers. Designate someone on staff to watch for stories with news potential.

## Cultivate a good relationship

Develop a strong relationship with weekly newspapers in your community. The end result will see your school's efforts promoted to the broadest possible audience at little or no cost to your budget. ■

Contributed by Tamara Stecyk, ASBA Communications. Ms. Stecyk is a former editor at the Edson Leader and worked as a journalist at Alberta weekly newspapers for 12 years.