

Media Outreach Through Newspapers

Media outreach through newspapers can be a very effective means of increasing your visibility and advocating for a particular policy, program or approach to helping students and schools succeed. Newspapers reach broad audiences and offer a number of options for conveying your message. You can send a press release, write a letter-to-the-editor, submit an Op-Ed, write an article or column, or offer to serve as an expert for interviews by journalists. Each has a different purpose and format, which are outlined below, along with some general guidelines and specific tips for each kind of media writing.

General Guidelines

Think local. Start with your local papers. Do not feel that you need to try to get published in your state's largest paper in order to make a difference. The major papers are inundated with submissions of all kinds and are very difficult to break into. Newspapers are most likely to respond to and publish salient, relevant pieces from local professionals on local issues.

Be relevant. You want to write on a topic, or at least frame the topic, in a way that is relevant to the newspaper's readership. Luckily school psychologists work on many, many issues relevant to parents, community leaders and policymakers. Be sure to understand the context in which you are writing (i.e., pick an issue that is on people's minds such as reading, bullying, testing, suicide). Link your objective or key points to the readers' priorities and concerns and **articulate the impact on student/school outcomes.**

Understand your audience's perspective. Even when conveying the simplest information, you will be more effective when you know why people would care, what is in it for them, what role they may play in the problem/solution, and how the solution or information you are presenting meets their needs.

Be clear and concise. Editors have no tolerance for sloppy or meandering writing. Neither do most readers. Space is at a premium. Always use audience appropriate language. Avoid acronyms/technical language and use active tense. Be sure to use the appropriate tone or "voice" for the kind of piece you are writing (see specifics below). Ask a colleague or colleagues to review and proof read your work.

Be accurate. Make sure your facts are straight. Nothing kills your credibility more quickly than having a serious error in your piece. This includes spelling names correctly.

Identify the preferred method of submission. Although mail and fax are still acceptable, e-mail has become the primary means of submitting written work to media outlets. **Most outlets will not accept e-mail attachments**, however, so be sure to paste your copy into the body of the e-mail. If you fax a hard copy on letterhead as well, be sure to indicate that you also sent the e-mail with the date and time.

Submit the piece to the right person. Press releases generally go to the news or metro editor or desk. Columns or news articles would go to the editor of the appropriate department (most likely life/style/family/education), if the paper is large enough to have separate departments. Letters-to-the-Editor and Op-Eds would go to the editorial/opinion page editor. This information may be available on

the website; if not, simply call the main number and ask for the person who handles the topic or type of piece you are submitting.

Sending A Press Release

Press releases are factual, informational announcements about events, awards, programs, studies, accomplishments, etc. They generally come from an organization, as opposed to an individual, convey who, what, where, when, and why, and are distributed to multiple media outlets at the same time. An effective press release can easily be turned into a short article. Be sure to:

- Get permission from your principal/superintendent, which is required by most districts.
- Coordinate with your school/district public relations office and other school psychologists in your district.
- Identify the preferred method to send the release (email, fax, mail, etc.) and a contact name at the media outlet(s).
- Keep the release brief, and information factual and to the point, typically 1-2 pages.
- Include a release date, name and contact information, and “headline” at the top.
- Include details or examples from your district to illustrate a point.
- Avoid jargon. Use short sentences and paragraphs.
- Use either –30– or ### at the bottom of the last page to indicate the end of your press release. If your release is longer than one page, center –More– at the bottom of all but the last page.

Writing and Submitting a Guest Article or Column

Many newspapers accept columns or articles from “guest” authors. Generally in local papers, these pieces provide useful information, guidelines or tips on a topic relevant to readers and that reflects the expertise of the writer. They typically do not express an opinion and, for the topics most likely to be covered by a school psychologist, usually appear in the equivalent of the paper’s Life or Style section. Topical articles also can be submitted to professional newsletters and papers (e.g., the local principals organization). The length of the article will depend on the paper but 500-1000 words is the typical range. Be sure to:

- Find out what papers accept guest articles and what their guidelines are. You can submit an article “cold”; however, it may be more effective to call the editor to “pitch” your idea for the article before you go to the trouble of writing and submitting it. He or she will let you know if they are interested but won’t guarantee printing the piece until they see it.
- Follow the writing guidelines provided above. In general, you should write to an average reader who needs to know the basics, not everything you know.
- Provide a brief introduction/overview of the topic. Define the problem. Outline the solution. Explain the benefits.
- You can also begin with a brief scenario to draw the reader in, (e.g., “*Ms. Wright, the first period English teacher, looked out over a sea of drooping eyes and heads laying on their desks...*”).
- Focus on two or three key messages, backed up by a few supporting points.
- Provide specific suggestions on what educators/parents/the community can do to address the issue and how this improves outcomes for children and schools in your community.
- Keep the focus local but incorporate one or two facts or statistics that put the information you are providing into a “best practice” or broader education context. Do not include citations but do name the source of your information in the article, (e.g., “*According to the National Association of School Psychologists...*”).
- Incorporate to the extent possible the importance of prevention/early intervention and the link between the issue/solution, learning/behavior, and school-wide objectives.
- If the paper runs your article, send a thank you note to the editor to help establish a relationship with him or her. You can offer to provide a regular column or article but be clear what you can take on.

- Ask if you can reprint your article in the school newspaper or post it on the school website. Some papers will let you do this and you'll get more exposure for yourself and the issue. Do not do so without permission.
- Note that because of union rules, some papers will pay you for your article.

Writing and Submitting a Letter-to-the-Editor

Letters-to-the-Editor generally are brief, directed responses to a story that has been or is being covered in the newspaper and usually run on the paper's official editorial page. They are very short (150-250 words), come from an individual, not an organization, and almost always convey a local perspective. You can use a letter-to-the editor to respond to a specific news article or column, to share your perspective/expertise, to point out or correct an error, to reinforce a point, or to reflect on the significance of an event. You do not necessarily need to have direct experience with the story being covered but can look for links between what you do and the story. Be sure to:

- Confirm the length of submissions permitted.
- Read other letters-to-the-editor to get a sense of style, focus and topics covered recently.
- Be timely. The sooner you submit your letter in relation to the coverage, the more relevant it will be.
- Follow the writing tips provided above.
- Include in the body of the letter some indication of your expertise on the issue since you most likely will be writing on stories related to school and/or children's mental health and development, (e.g., "*Working with students this age, I find...*").
- Avoid unnecessary words, (e.g. "*It is most common that teachers need...*" could be shortened to "*Commonly teachers need...*")
- Always use a professional tone; never launch a personal attack.
- Make every sentence count.
- Be prepared to be edited. Space in newspapers is at a premium.
- Paste your letter into your e-mail. Don't send attachments.
- Include your name, title, and home and work phone numbers.
- Follow-up, if the paper offers that ability. Most papers now have auto-replies that indicated they have received your letter with information on how they will contact you if they choose to run your letter. Most papers run letters within a week of submission, because of currency. They generally will not contact you if they are not going use it.

If your letter is printed, it becomes the property of the newspaper. Find out if you will need permission from the paper to reprint or copy it for wide distribution.

Writing and Submitting an Op-Ed

An Op-Ed is an opinion piece published in a newspaper but written by someone who is not on that newspaper's editorial staff. Often these are columns written by syndicated columnists; however, many papers publish Op-Eds by individuals as well. The term Op-Ed derives from the fact that the articles run on the page opposite the paper's official editorial page. They are not responses to an article that has appeared in the paper, although they can (and probably should) relate to issues in the news.

Op-Eds are typically 500-800 words long, and unlike a "useful tips" column or article, express your opinion on an issue. Newspapers publish Op-Eds by people "whose opinion matters" on the topic being addressed. This does not mean that you need to be an elected official, chairman of the board, or award winner; however who you are and what you do generally determines whether or not the newspaper believes readers will have a reason to care about what you say. Co-authoring an Op-Ed with another person (e.g., a school psychologist in another district, a school social worker or even a parent) sometimes can lend additional credibility to the piece. Examples of characteristics that "matter" include:

- Direct relation to an event (you were responded to the school shooting).
- Proximal relation to the issue (you helped develop the district's crisis plan).
- Experience/role (you counsel students with mental health problems).

- Unique perspective (you can offer an “inside” understanding of the issue).
- Reputation/authority (you have just written a book on the topic; you are president/chair of the local/state organization of...).

Writing your Op-Ed. Op-Ed writing is unique in that you need to blend personal writing style and voice with professional expertise and factual information. Op-Eds are not academic articles, tracts, open-ended letters to an elected official or policymaker, or “how-to” fact sheets. They are a cogent essay characterized by brevity, clarity, voice, relevance, and timeliness and intended to sway the readers’ opinions on an issue or topic. When writing an Op-Ed, be sure to:

- Identify the paper that you want to publish your Op-Ed. Have more than one paper in mind so that if your first choice does not run the piece, you can submit it the next paper in line.
- Confirm that the paper(s) accept Op-Eds and their submission guidelines. Call the paper or check on the website. **FOLLOW THESE WRITING AND SUBMISSION GUIDELINES!**
- Read Op-Eds in the paper to get a sense of length, style, format, messages, and types of authors.
- Identify two or three key messages or points you want to make.
- Draw the reader into the article with a declarative sentence or two that makes your overarching point, (e.g., “*Children come to school each day with more than their lunch and backpack. They bring a myriad of life factors that shape their learning and development. Virtually all are related to their mental health.*”)
- Include anecdotes to “personalize” your point.
- Relate your messages to the local community.
- Include a concluding paragraph that refocuses on the benefits to children and schools associated with your opinion, (e.g., “*Effective prevention efforts mobilize a school’s most vital resource—the students—to be a school’s most powerful force in fostering a caring culture in which all students can grow and learn. It is a wise investment.*”)
- Follow the writing tips provided above. **Avoid jargon and passive writing.**
- Do not include citations but be able to provide the paper with references if you are using information from such materials in the Op-Ed. You can say, “*According to the Surgeon General’s report on children’s mental health...*”

Submitting your Op-Ed. Op-Eds can only be submitted to one paper at a time. If the paper runs your Op-Ed, it becomes their property and you may not submit it elsewhere. However, if they don’t run it, you can and should “shop” the article to another paper. The goal is to get the piece published, not just get it published in the largest paper. When submitting the Op-Ed, be sure to:

- Follow the submission guidelines.
- Paste your article into the body of your e-mail.
- Include your name, title, and home and work phone numbers, as well as a few sentences about yourself and your credentials on the topic.
- Most papers will send an auto-reply to let you know they received the submission and how long it is likely to take for them to make a decision (generally within a week).
- If your piece is extremely time sensitive, include this in your email.
- Follow up within 24 hours to confirm that they received the piece. However, calling repeatedly is not appropriate and may annoy the editor(s).
- Let the editor know that you are submitting this exclusively to them but would like to submit elsewhere if they are not going to use it.
- If the paper runs the piece, send a thank you note to the editor. This will help develop a relationship with paper.
- Find out if you need permission from the paper to reprint or copy it for wide distribution.

Additional Things to Consider

- Get together with your colleagues to brainstorm article or Op-Ed ideas. Develop some key messages and bullet points on those topics in advance. Obvious topics include: school safety, crisis,

response, mental health, home-school-community collaboration, cost-benefits of prevention, creating positive school climates, need for more educational resources.

- Submit articles to your school/district newsletters as a way of practicing your writing and message development. These articles reach a very important audience and can later be adapted for a newspaper.
- Conversely, if you write an Op-Ed that is not published by a paper, consider submitting it to a district or professional publication.
- Share the work. Identify colleagues to write on different topics.
- Develop a media plan for responding quickly to time sensitive issues that come up unexpectedly, such as a school crisis or a piece of legislation.
- Have a digital B/W and color photo of yourself available to send electronically, as some papers run photos with their Op-Eds or guest columns.
- Send copies of your published articles and Op-Eds to key stakeholders, including colleagues, elected officials, your administrators, community service providers, etc. Include it with a cover note that says something along the lines of, "Thought you might be interested in this piece. I appreciate working with you to improve outcomes for our children and youth".
- Offer to be a spokesperson for the media. More and more frequently issues on which you work are addressed in the media and reporters often look for input from local experts. Discuss with your supervisor the possibility of going to the district communication director to volunteer as a spokesperson. Be clear what issues (e.g., discipline, test anxiety, school climate) you are comfortable addressing and for what age groups.

For further information on communications or media outreach, visit www.nasponline.org or contact Kathy Cowan, NASP Director Communications at kcowan@naspweb.org. © 2006, National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814, (301) 657-0270.