

COMMUNICATION PRINCIPLES for PRINCIPALS

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SCHOOL COMMUNICATIONS AND WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

ABOUT

Principles for Principals offers key information and messages for principals to consider in communicating the basics and getting parents involved. It is written and published by the DoDEA Communications Office.

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Every DoDEA leader (HQ, region, district, community, and school) has a responsibility to communicate with our employees, parents, students, commands, union leaders, and the general public. Communicating crucial information and guidance about plans related to the operation of our schools (in-person, remotely or virtually) requires us to use all of the DoDEA and command assets available to you in our DoDEA communities.

This tip sheet will help Principals to better understand and leverage the channels available in our military communities. It will provide guidance when the commercial (or outside the gate) media come calling with a question.

OUR SCHOOL OPERATIONS DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC HEIGHTENS THE NEED TO DELIVER CRITICAL INFORMATION TO OUR STAKEHOLDERS AND PIQUES THE INTEREST OF BOTH DOD AND COMMERCIAL (OR OUTSIDE THE GATE) MEDIA WHO MAY COVER YOUR SCHOOL NEWS.

DOD COMMAND INFORMATION

Command information is essentially all official/unofficial internal communication efforts a school principal or commander can leverage in sharing information with our employees, parents/families, commands, subordinate leaders, community partners within a school/military community. Command Information (CI) tools are DoD assets and their use is encouraged and recommended. Most often, Principals are free to engage them fully using

messaging provided by the HQ, region, or district. It is one of the easiest ways to get your information out to our audiences and those who need to hear it.

- The DoDEA CI/communication tools normally managed and used by Principals include websites, social media, multimedia/print products, newsletters, presentations and speeches. All of these tools help Principals share information and to better tell our story with our school and military communities.
- Military communities and commands have both similar/additional CI tools that can help amplify and reinforce our messages because they have a larger reach and audience. Their purpose is to provide, promote, explain, and enhance DoD and command policies and programs to members of the community through official and unofficial communication channels. The command emphasis on our topics when we use their channels helps to underscore the importance and value the command places on education and school operations.
- These CI tools are managed or coordinated by the installation public affairs officer (PAO) and can include installation newspapers, command magazines or multimedia publications, official web and social media sites, and television/radio tools like AFN or internal command cable channels.

MEDIA COVERAGE

The mission of the military command and its various installation tenants is a topic of interest for local, national and international media. World events focus a great deal of attention on the military and military installations around the globe. There is a great deal of interest today in the impact of COVID-19 on military operations and personnel. Since schools are an important quality of life element in military communities, media interest is normal.

- Local, national and international commercial (or outside the gate) media are NOT internal DOD assets. They can be an important vehicle in telling our story but there is much to be cautious about.
- We have a good story to tell; however, we must protect the privacy of our families and be sensitive to concerns from the command and our parents.
- Engaging with outside media requires the facilitation of a public affairs officer (PAO). PAOs help the public understand the military, use DoD approved protocols for engagements between reporters and DoD personnel including school employees, escort media on the installation and to our campuses, and create news and information products that inform the public on command/school activities at home and abroad.
- The Americas Region has far more commercial media who follow our school news than the Pacific or Europe regions.

ABOUT STARS AND STRIPES

The STARS AND STRIPES is a DoD owned asset and covers news and information that is relevant, of interest, or otherwise impacts DoD personnel and their families overseas. The STARS AND STRIPES provides the same range of international, national, and regional news and opinion from commercial (or outside the gate) sources, as is provided by newspapers in the United States.

- Even though reporters for The STARS AND STRIPES often live in military communities and have children in our schools, they operate in the same manner as commercial media representatives.
- They are required to follow the access rules set by each installation when acting in their reporting capacity.
- DoDEA personnel should always contact a public affairs officer when engaging with a STARS AND STRIPES reporter, as they would with any commercial (or outside the gate) media.
- As a general rule, they do not cover news from our stateside schools.

KNOW YOUR DODEA AND LOCAL INSTALLATION PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICERS (PAOS)

DoDEA has a public affairs responsibility and a robust communication function. Each region has a public affairs officer who can provide help and guidance in your time zone. HQ provides support on systemic public affairs issues. The DoDEA HQ and Region PAOs are always available to assist principals and employees with any media related topics.

All installations have a Public Affairs Office/ Officer (PAO) who can be called for assistance and guidance on any media issues. In fact, you should never agree to media requests or interviews without coordinating access with the local PAO. The commander has a vested interest in what happens on his/her installation and has a right to know when DoDEA is conducting a media engagement on the installation.

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KEEP YOUR LEADERSHIP INFORMED

No leaders like to be surprised with a media story that brings negative attention to a school or community. A basic rule is always to keep the chain of command informed. That goes for both good and bad news!

ACCESS TO THE INSTALLATION OR SCHOOL

News media representatives should always contact the Principal or the PAO to request an interview. This is a practice of journalistic courtesy. We do not ever want to appear to control access to our students/teachers or censor what our students say, but school administrators have a right to know when the news media is interested in talking with a student, teacher, or principal. If approached independently by a reporter, contact your PAO for assistance.

The commander has the right and responsibility to control media access to any installation. This is done through the installation PAO.

- Principals have the right to request that all media fully coordinate their activities on school grounds, in school facilities, and classrooms during the school day with the school principal.
- Just because the media may be on your installation, don't assume they are doing stories with the blessing of the commander. Always check with the PAO before working with any reporters. That is a basic courtesy in media relations.
- Talk among the staff about media issues and respect any guidance provided by the command.

TALKING TO REPORTERS IS YOUR DECISION.

As a school leader, you may choose whether or not you want to be interviewed. Your PAO will give you sound advice. Keep in mind that those who decline, particularly in leadership positions, can give the impression that they are withholding information and risk sending the wrong message about your unit and your mission. You can help reporters get it right! Always ask for guidance from your DoDEA or local PAO.

When you are being interviewed about a school matter or policy, you are acting in a capacity as an official representative of the school and of the Department of Defense.

If you have not been selected for an interview in coordination with a PAO, you have the right to give an opinion, but remember, it is your opinion as a private citizen, and not as a representative of the school or Department of Defense and that must be clear to the reporter.

THE CARDINAL RULE WHEN SPEAKING TO THE MEDIA: STAY IN YOUR LANE OR AREA OF EXPERTISE AND AUTHORITY!

- Talk about what YOU know – YOUR job, mission, classroom or school.
- Remember that you are representing your school and ultimately, the Department of Defense.
- Don't try to answer questions that are above your level or outside your area of expertise.
- Avoid political or foreign policy matters.
- Don't respond to rumors.
- Don't discuss specific health or medical information that would violate a person's privacy.
- Refer matters of public health to the appropriate medical/public health facility.
- If the reporter wants information that isn't within your scope, refer them to the local military Public Affairs Office or to the DoDEA, Region or HQ Public Affairs Officer.
- For inquiries related to COVID-19 and our schools, contact your Region PAO. When it comes to how a Health Condition level is set, let the local command speak to the issues. They have the best information.

SOME TIPS FOR MEDIA INTERVIEWS

- Don't respond to statements. Let the reporter ask a question before you respond.
- Don't try to answer "what if" questions.
- Remain in control of the interview. Control your answers, your emotions, and the amount of time you spend in an interview. Keep your comments brief and to the point. NEVER be afraid to say, "I don't know."
- When presented with multi-part questions, answer one part at a time.
- Take your time and don't be pressured by silence. Think about your answers before you respond.
- If a reporter becomes aggressive or you feel uncomfortable, politely end the interview.
- Relax. You'll look more confident and assured.
- Speak at a slow, conversational pace.
- Ignore cameras and talk to the interviewer.

- Approach the interview with the belief that there is no such thing as “OFF THE RECORD” and that everything you say can or may appear in print or in a broadcast.

BE MINDFUL OF THE DOD RULES ON REPORTING NUMBERS OF COVID CASES

DoD has instructed installation commanders to continue to work with local community health officials to share information on base community cases. DoDEA does not report the aggregate number of individual cases at individual schools/districts/regions. Those numbers are reported to the installation and up the DoDEA chain of command. The DoD (OSD PA) is the release authority for the information of our DoDEA collective numbers. Refer questions on numbers to DoDEA or local PAO.

COMMON SENSE

Common sense is the best indicator of appropriateness when dealing with the media. Please be aware that coverage, in most cases, is very positive for our system and our students. Any national press coverage offers us an opportunity to highlight the many quality programs we have and the numerous successes in our DoD Schools overseas and in the United States and its territories. In turn, every comment by an employee reflects in some way on our organization.

Always prepare. Anticipate questions. Use available talking points and messages developed by DoDEA to guide your responses. Ask your DoDEA region PAO for help.

Working with the media can be a good -- even enjoyable -- opportunity for military personnel, civilian employees, schools, units, families and reporters. Just remember a few simple rules and use the expertise available from the Public Affairs Office. Should you need additional information or have questions, please contact the Public Affairs Officer.