

## The Principal

BRUCE CONRAD DAVIS

### Managing the Media

News reporters' regard for educators is often somewhat lower than the bar at the finale of a limbo dance contest. They resent educators' giving them only good news and pretending bad news about schools doesn't exist. What little regard they may have can erode quickly when an educator rushes in with last-minute, poorly written press releases that reek of selfish interests. Reporters must do a certain amount of research and interviews with us in order to write their reports. They study us, but we don't study them. We should.

I've been a member of the Pacific Coast Press Club for the past 25 years. I have hobnobbed with many reporters and editors for the electronic and print media, published over a million words in newspapers and magazines, hosted a television talk show, and written radio and television commentary. I've listened to the derisive remarks the reporters make about us—"These people are supposed to be educators, but they can't write or spell"—and I've had some success in tempering their thinking. Most educators don't have time for this, but there are some things they can do to ensure fair coverage.

I cultivate my relationship with the media in much the same way I care for my garden: I give it tender loving care, and I always make sure I've fertilized the soil before I pop in the seeds. Reporters are like us. They deal constantly with stress and pressure. They want recognition and appreciation for their work, and they value acknowledgment of their work from the educators they cover.

When a reporter writes a good piece about education, I note who the reporter is and then get in touch with him or her and praise the work. I pick out phrases that I especially enjoy and comment specifically on those "little nuggets." I let myself go with effusive

praise. When a piece is especially good, I send an appropriate letter to the editor and a blind copy to the reporter so he or she knows I'm a fan. It's important to track reporters other than those who usually write education pieces, because you never know

when they may be assigned to write something on education or when you may have a bit of news they would find interesting.

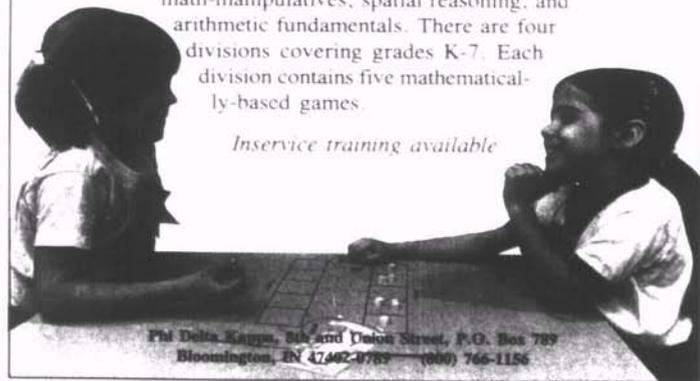
I keep a log of these contacts with reporters so I know when and why I contacted them. Then when I call

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*Educators can go a long way toward ensuring fair coverage of their schools by building rapport with reporters from the local media, as this principal is doing.*

*Photograph by Betty Buchignani, Memphis, Tennessee*

again, I can remind them that I wrote last May about that interesting piece they did on water polo, and today I'm delighted with some golden phrases they penned about creative suffering. I never fabricate praise—these folks are not stupid—they have a feeling for when they have done something good. Fabricated praise would sound the death knell for my approach.

When reporters write a piece about my school, I send them thank-you notes. I take them to lunch. Some are on my Christmas card list. I keep files on them. I feed them information, some of which is not completely positive. Reporters are sick of hearing from educators with nothing but good news. They know education isn't as rosy as we want them to believe. You'll gain credibility if you lace the good news with the bad.

## Reporters are sick of hearing from educators with nothing but good news.

Most of us like to offer opinions. Ask the reporter what he or she thinks are some of the problems facing education. Maybe you both agree the music curriculum needs to be upgraded. Chances are you'll find some common ground. Strongly endorse the opinions you share with the reporter, pointing out what you have done to correct the problems. You just may have a reporter who will champion your cause. And by mixing the good with the bad, you've recognized the reporter's intelligence. He or she may be impressed with your brilliance in seeing the media's side.

Look for the hook; the hook is mother's milk to the reporter. The fact that you're going to dress up like an Easter bunny and have an Easter egg hunt with 650 kids for 2,000 eggs is only mildly interesting to the reporter. But when you throw in the fact that 21 police officers from competing police departments are going to help the kids find the eggs, that American Express is donating a dollar for every egg they find, and all of the money is going to help eradicate illiteracy, you've got the hook: Kids and Kops for Literacy.

Think of yourself as an asset, the reporters' asset. Reporters need you for many reasons. Never forget this and behave accordingly. It pays off. □

**Bruce Conrad Davis** is Principal of the Emerson School, 7544 E. Emerson Pl., Rosemead, CA 91770.

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