MEDIA RELATIONS GUIDELINES

These guidelines cover the basics of how to handle contact with the news media. They also provide information on news media access to students in LACOE programs.

As a public agency, LACOE has a responsibility to be open and responsive to information requests from the news media. Public awareness of our agency and its work is vital to our accountability and success. The news media are a major vehicle for communicating with our public.

LACOE’s Communications Department is designated as the Office’s principal liaison with the news media. Among its responsibilities, the department:

- Ensures that LACOE responds to news media inquiries in a timely, honest, and cooperative way
- Works to increase public awareness about LACOE by promoting media coverage through news releases, “story pitches,” events, and other strategies

The Communications Department has expertise in media relations and weighs each contact to determine the best way to provide information.

In some cases, a Communications Department representative will act as the official media spokesperson on a given issue.

In many — if not most — cases, LACOE managers and administrators (assistant superintendents, directors, principals, consultants) will be called on to act as spokespersons because they have the needed information, knowledge, experience, expertise or perspective. Communications staff work with designated spokespersons to prepare for media interviews as needed.

Communications staff is always available to provide support, consultation, and training in situations involving contact with the news media.

When the Media Call You

A reporter, producer or other news media representative may call your office or site for a number of reasons, for example:

- To get information for a story about LACOE or one of its programs or schools
- To get information about a LACOE student or staff member
- To get information or comments for an education news story

When a news media representative calls your office/site:

All staff should act with courtesy and professionalism when taking calls from the news media. How this call is handled may be the reporter’s first impression of LACOE and may be reflected in any resulting news coverage.

Try to take a media call right away or return the call within 15 minutes. If you can’t do this, refer the media representative to the LACOE Communications Department at 562-922-6360. (We don’t want news stories involving LACOE to say that we were unavailable for comment — which is what could happen if we don’t return the call!)

When answering or returning media calls, determine:

- The reporter’s name, media outlet, phone, fax, e-mail
- The reporter’s deadline
- The subject/intent of the story
- What the reporter wants — information, interview, photo/videotaping, site visit

When referring the media to the Communications Department, please don’t say you are not allowed to talk to a reporter or have to get permission to do so. (That would actually violate your constitutional right to free speech!) Instead, tell a reporter: “Our Office policy is to refer all media inquiries to our Communications Department. You can reach them at 562-922-6360.”

Don’t let a reporter compel you to answer questions on the spot. It is always beneficial to prepare for an interview to provide accurate information. Reschedule the interview for a mutually agreeable time so you can gather information and prepare a response.

Work with the Communications Department to determine the appropriate response.

Inform the Communications Department as soon as possible if and when you have contact with the news media.

Ensure that the reporter’s deadline is met.
When the Media Show Up

A reporter or camera crew may show up unannounced at a LACOE site. This is most likely to occur in crisis situations at the site or in the community. Or it could occur if the media learn about an event at your site from another source.

When dealing with reporters and camera crews who may show up unannounced, use the same general guidelines for handling media calls.

A Few Additional Considerations:

Even if a reporter is on site, you don’t have to answer questions on the spot. Reschedule the interview for a mutually agreeable time so you can gather information and prepare a response.

News media representatives have certain rights of access to public schools for legitimate news-gathering purposes. At the same time, school officials have the authority to deny such access when they believe the media’s presence is disruptive or interfering with classes or other school activities.

LACOE encourages site administrators to make every effort to accommodate the reasonable requests of the legitimate news media for access to our schools and sites so long as that access does not disrupt the peaceful conduct of educational activities.

However, LACOE students who are under the jurisdiction of the Juvenile Court cannot be interviewed, photographed, or filmed — even on a confidential basis — without prior approval. (See Guidelines on Media Access to Students in LACOE Programs.)

Special education students have a legal right to maintain confidentiality of the nature of their disability. Members of the media should be requested not to reveal the nature of a student’s disability in any news coverage. Ensure that any students to be interviewed or photographed have a signed LACOE “Parent/Guardian Publicity Authorization and Release” form on file.

When You Want to Call the Media

When you believe you have a positive news story to share with the public, contact the Communications Department. The department coordinates LACOE’s media contacts and is the only LACOE department authorized to distribute news releases or hold news conferences.

Please do not call a reporter directly without first consulting with the department.

Contact the department at least two weeks in advance of events you want to publicize.

A public information officer (PIO) will work with you to gather information and determine if and how the news media should be contacted. The PIO will use measures similar to those used by editors and reporters to determine if your story is newsworthy, for example:

- Is it about something new/unusual/a first? Is this a new approach to solving problems? Is this a new way of doing things?

- Is this story interesting and relevant to the public who reads the newspaper, listens to the radio or watches TV? Editors and reporters will want to know why their readers, listeners, and viewers should care about the story — not why it’s important to LACOE.

- Is this story timely? Is it tied to an issue/event currently in the news?

Examples of strong news stories include:

- Unique or unusual programs or special events
- Expert commentary on and interpretation of current events (especially if it’s a new or controversial point of view)
- Interesting or unusual student/staff stories/profiles with strong human interest

Examples of weaker stories include:

- Conferences, guest speakers, and visitors
- Programs/events that are not unique — unless they represent an interesting trend
- Awards/appointments

The PIO will determine which media outlets might be interested in the story and how the information should be conveyed.

Some news items may be more appropriate for publicity through LACOE’s newsletters, website, and social media sites.
Media Interviewing Tips

- Identify 2-3 key messages you want to deliver and stick to them.
- Use anecdotes and facts to illustrate your points.
- Target your messages to your most important audience, e.g., parents, community, school districts.
- Be brief and to-the-point. For broadcast interviews, try to convey your key messages in 15 seconds or less. Use short, snappy, colorful quotes.
- Your responses should stand on their own. Speak in complete sentences since the reporter’s question is rarely included in the story.
- Acknowledge the reporter’s questions and bridge to your messages.
- Use plain language. Don’t use acronyms, jargon, and “educationalese.”
- Provide brief, succinct background materials.
- Be honest, open, and cooperative. Never, never lie.
- Anticipate difficult questions.
- Don’t ask to review or approve the story before it airs/is printed.
- Ask the reporter to identify you and your program as being affiliated with the Los Angeles County Office of Education.
- Never say “no comment.” It sounds like you’re hiding something. If necessary, explain why it is not appropriate or possible for you to answer the question.
- Don’t be afraid to say, “I don’t know.” But do find out the answer or point the reporter to another source for the information.
- Never speak to a reporter “off the record”— unless you want it on the record.
Guidelines on Media Access to Students in LACOE Programs

Students in Juvenile Court Schools (JCS)

LACOE serves students in institutional settings who are under the jurisdiction of the Juvenile Court and supervision of the Probation Department.

The Court protects the interests of minors under its jurisdiction by ensuring confidentiality of records, documents, and information about their involvement in the justice system. Such records include news stories and other communication regarding the minors’ participation in programs connected with the justice system, such as JCS.

As a partner with the Court and Probation, LACOE takes seriously the obligation to protect our students’ confidentiality rights.

Any news media contact with minors in JCS programs, activities, and events must be approved in advance as outlined below. The following rules also apply to LACOE staff who wish to videotape or publish photos/articles involving these minors.

The LACOE Communications Department can assist members of the news media and others in securing the necessary approvals and clearances outlined below.

For minors removed from the physical custody of the parent/legal guardian and under the jurisdiction of the Juvenile Court and supervision of the Probation Department (e.g., students in juvenile halls, probation camps, and group homes):

Anyone who wishes to interview, photograph, videotape, or voice record a minor (or wishes to invite media coverage of an activity involving minors) must send a formal petition to the Presiding Judge of the Juvenile Court in advance. The request must describe the purpose of the contact and the intended audience for the final product.

Written consent of students and their parents/guardians is required (see Media Interview Agreement Form).

(Note: JCS students age 18 and older may give their own consent to be photographed, interviewed, etc. In these cases, a petition to the Juvenile Court is not required. The adult student can sign the Media Interview Agreement form him/herself.)

Once a formal media petition is submitted, the Court secures approvals from Probation and attorneys as necessary.

In most cases, the petition will seek a limited waiver of confidentiality allowing media access but prohibiting minors’ identities from being revealed:

- Photos/videos cannot show faces, profiles, or any other identifiable features of minors
- Names of minors must remain confidential and cannot be used in final products
- Confidential information about a minor’s case, including the conduct that led to his or her involvement with the Juvenile Court, cannot be published, broadcast, divulged, or used for any purpose

Allow at least 10 working days for this approval.

JCS students under age 18 may be interviewed and photographed to include their faces and first name on a case-by-case basis. In these cases, a petition seeking a “full waiver of confidentiality” is submitted to the Juvenile Court for each student.

Work with the Communications Department to submit this type of petition to the Juvenile Court.

Allow at least 21 working days for approval of a petition that seeks a full waiver of confidentiality for a minor in Juvenile Court Schools.

At-risk Students in County Community Schools

Written consent of students and their parents/guardians is required (see Media Interview Agreement Form).

Adult students age 18 or older may give their own consent and sign the Media Interview Agreement Form themselves.

Students in Other LACOE Programs (Special Education, CalSAFE, iPoly, LACHSA, Head Start)

Members of the media engaged in legitimate news gathering on a public school campus may speak to, photograph, and film students without prior permission from parents.

However, students may decline to speak to the media and may refuse to be interviewed, filmed, or photographed. Also, parents have the right to withhold permission for their children to be interviewed, filmed, or photographed. For this reason, it may be helpful to have these parents sign an “opt-out” form (News Media Access to Students) at the beginning of the school year. If parents have expressed, either orally or in writing, that they do not want their children speaking to or being photographed by the media, then the school must honor this request.
Time permitting, a site administrator may wish to inform parents when media visits will take place. A simple written statement can be given to parents (and translated into the appropriate languages) prior to the media coming onto your campus. For example:

**Dear Parent/Guardian:**

*On (date media will be coming), *(name of news organizations)* will be on our campus to do a story about *(state business)*. Your child may be photographed or interviewed for the story. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me.*

**Parent/Guardian Publicity Authorization and Release**

Frequently, LACOE will want to include students in our print, video, audio, and electronic communications. Please ensure that a signed Parent/Guardian Publicity Authorization and Release form is on file for any student included in LACOE-produced publications, videos, web pages, and other communications.

The Parent/Guardian Publicity Authorization and Release form is not applicable to students in JCS. (See Guidelines on Media Access to Students in LACOE Programs.)

**Note:**

According to a California Attorney General opinion dated August 26, 2002: “Members of the news media may not attend a child’s individualized education program [IEP] meeting as observers even though their attendance has the consent of the parents.” The opinion also says, “members of the news media, as well as members of the public, may attend the next level in the process at the discretion of parents… which is a [due process] hearing the parents may request if they disagree with any part of the IEP that the public agency intends to implement.” (Source: California Department of Education)