



2300 Clarendon Boulevard Suite 600  
Arlington, VA 22201  
703-528-7100

## **June 2003**

### **Talking to reporters about your “needs improvement” school list**

The news media is both a powerful source of information about developments in education and an agenda setter. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and its public reporting of schools that do not meet “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) is an opportunity to galvanize media and public attention toward the needs of children and schools. Following are suggestions for taking advantage of an unprecedented series of “teachable moments” in the next months.

#### **1. Have a plan and a message**

---

**Be honest, brutally honest.** The new accountability system with disaggregated data helps school systems identify pervasive and specific problems, many of them previously masked in the reporting of averages. This is an opportunity to target help and change, not blame. Be honest and specific about what the data show and what can be done to make improvements. You’ll build vital credibility for honestly sharing the bad news along with the good.

**Develop a credible message** with evidence and action steps to support it. Build your media relations strategy around your overarching message (example: “Rising to the challenge: helping *all* students achieve.”), starting with your proposed actions to help low-performing schools.

**Cultivate credible messengers** (inside and outside your organization) to deliver your message and support your plan to improve schools on the “needs improvement” list. Local superintendents, parents and teacher leaders who’ve helped turn around a low-performing school can be valuable ambassadors of your plan. Talk to them about your key points so that you have a chorus of voices delivering a consistent, authoritative, positive story. For example, when Michigan released its list of 216 low-performing schools, a local superintendent, a local principal of a school that had been removed from the list and a group of parents were available to talk with reporters, each delivering strong, positive messages consistent with the messages of Governor Jennifer Granholm and State Superintendent Tom Watkins.

**Use multiple channels** (inside and outside your organization) to communicate your message, supporting evidence and proactive plan. Tap traditional and nontraditional media: local parent newsletters; online chat rooms and bulletin boards; community gatherings; grocery store bulletin boards; talk radio; the letter-to-the-editor page; and education reporters and editors at your local newspapers, TV and radio stations.

**Sequence the release of data and announcements** into digestible, user-friendly parcels. Reporters usually cover only a limited quantity of data and issues at a time. Think of your media plan as a series of “lesson plans” that highlight and inform readers and viewers about specific problems and solutions that can be covered in one story (typically one-and-a-half minutes on television and 800 words in a newspaper). This also will give you more control over the message. For example, Minnesota released a computer-simulated projection of the number of schools likely to be on the “needs improvement” list to prepare the public for an increase in the number and to explain how reporting has changed. This will provide some background and understanding of AYP in advance of the official announcements later this summer.

**Anticipate tough questions and prepare answers** and sources of information for a better understanding of “what works” in improving student achievement and closing performance gaps. For example, the validity of the AYP formula is being questioned for identifying schools as “needing improvement” when only one group of students falls short. State leaders have successfully answered this question by lauding the ability to identify gaps in achievement more clearly so that educators can do what it takes to close them. Every child’s needs, no matter what their background, must be identified and met. Regularly update the “frequently asked questions” section of your Web site and disseminate this information regularly to media, educators and parent groups. Ohio and Michigan state education departments have good FAQs about AYP.

**Practice staying positive and focused on the main thing** — ensuring high-quality teaching that serves *all* students. For every announcement around low-performing schools, lead with and emphasize the help and interventions that will be targeted to schools and students who need it. Don’t be defensive — focus on the future. Provide localized information sources that parents can use to get specific information about their child’s school. Greatschools.net is an excellent national source that provides Web-based data on every public school in the country, plus parent-friendly advice ([www.greatschools.net](http://www.greatschools.net)).

## **2. Connect with reporters and editors early and often**

---

**Alert reporters and editors early that some significant changes are about to happen** in education. Set up editorial board meetings and one-on-one meetings with key education writers and reporters to provide them with background information and preview new changes to help them prepare to cover a range of issues related to the release of schools on the “needs improvement” list. Notify them that this year’s list of schools in need of improvement will likely be larger than previous years and explain the new focus on ensuring that all groups of students make progress. Under the old system, achievement gaps among different groups of students often were masked, making it more difficult to target help to students who needed it. Encourage them to consider using “needs

improvement” or “high priority” when describing schools on the list and not a “failing” label, as these terms more accurately reflect the condition of the school and point to solutions versus a static state of being. Communicating about a topic as confusing and complex as AYP requires time and relationships that establish your credibility. The North Carolina education department started briefing reporters and editorial boards about AYP this past winter.

**Put together a background folder** that helps explain the new accountability system and defines terms such as “highly qualified teacher” and “adequate yearly progress.” The Education Trust’s “ABC’s of AYP” should be included ([www.edtrust.org](http://www.edtrust.org)). The folder also should include a time line of events, reports, FAQs and important dates, such as the release of report cards, testing dates, and professional development institutes. Think of the folder as a deskside reference that reporters can use in their continuing coverage of NCLB issues. Make this reference tool available online and regularly update it. The North Carolina education department has published a comprehensive communications toolkit, with advice, templates and sample materials ([www.ncpublicschools.org/nclb](http://www.ncpublicschools.org/nclb)).

**Suggest to reporters and assignment editors that they produce a special series on issues raised in NCLB:** teacher quality, achievement gaps between different groups of students, the various types of and uses for tests, evaluating quality among schools, and tutoring programs. For example, the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette* and *Chicago Sun Times* each did an excellent series on teacher quality. ([www.post-gazette.com/localnews/20030202overviewregxp1.asp](http://www.post-gazette.com/localnews/20030202overviewregxp1.asp) and [www.suntimes.com/special\\_sections/failing\\_teacher/index.html#part1](http://www.suntimes.com/special_sections/failing_teacher/index.html#part1)). The *Boston Globe* did a two-part series on the role of attendance in the high school graduation test scores ([www.boston.com/dailyglobe2/152/learning/Faithful\\_attendance\\_seen\\_as\\_an\\_MCAS\\_key+.shtml](http://www.boston.com/dailyglobe2/152/learning/Faithful_attendance_seen_as_an_MCAS_key+.shtml)).

**Keep in touch and develop a scouting report of education coverage.** Become a regular source of information and insight for reporters and follow the issues they’re writing about. Maintain a clip file of education stories and study the bylines, trends, quotes and information sources included in each of the stories. Recognize a reporter’s good work and suggest other angles and information sources.

### **3. Know the “hooks” that make news**

---

The ingredients that comprise news are fairly predictable. Knowing this can help you take advantage of built-in media opportunities, create some of your own and anticipate the kinds of stories that are likely to develop. The Poynter Journalism Institute features a popular tool for assignment editors responsible for generating story ideas for reporters to cover each day. Use it to get ideas for packaging and pitching your story and monitor the listings to learn about education issues reporters are covering ([www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=2](http://www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=2)). Education Week is another excellent early warning system.

This list of newshooks will help you think like an assignment editor and work with the media more effectively.

**Controversy** is probably the most effective newshook. Issue a challenge. Decry the current complacency with conditions that sustain the achievement gap and demand a change. Using a computer simulation, Minnesota Education Commissioner Cheri Pierson Yecke released preliminary “needs improvement” school numbers along with a proactive plan to close the achievement gaps among different groups of students. Getting out ahead of the official list announcement, Minnesota was able to better control the message and define the terms for progress — closing the achievement gap among different groups of students. Conversely, if you are on the receiving end of a “controversy,” try not to be defensive. Instead welcome the opportunity to bring focus to the issue of making the education system serve *all* students and talk about solutions.

**Anomalies** (the strange, the unusual, the exception to the rule) are a staple of news. In education these include stories about the rich, white, suburban school district on the “needs improvement” list or the isolated rural school district struggling to comply with choice and teacher quality provisions. Remember your basic messages and stress that laws are rarely perfect and exceptions will have to be negotiated, but nothing should distract educators from the main focus of the law — ensuring that schools serve *all* children well. Suggest that a reporter cover a “beating the odds” school that illustrates the improved student achievement that is possible when assumptions are challenged and adults commit to making the changes required to ensure that schools serve *all* children. The Education Trust’s Dispelling the Myth Web site is a way to identify and learn from high-poverty and high-minority schools that have high student performance or have made substantial improvement in student achievement ([www.edtrust.org/main/main/DTM.asp](http://www.edtrust.org/main/main/DTM.asp)).

**Comparisons** among school and student performance, school staff qualifications, school budgets, and conditions offer rich content to make pitches to reporters. With an unprecedented amount of school data available, communicators can draw attention to efforts to close the achievement gap among different groups of students. Reporters are attracted to the most dramatic angles. References to “first,” “only,” “record-breaking,” “significant,” or “highest” and “lowest” will make a story more appealing. For example, this *Charlotte Observer* story offered the “first look at student performance under the public school choice plan([www.charlotte.com/mld/charlotte/living/education/6052552.htm](http://www.charlotte.com/mld/charlotte/living/education/6052552.htm)).

**Consumer-oriented “news you can use”** is an angle ripe for communicating about low-performing schools. It brings a story one step beyond the comparisons described above. Produce a series of tools that help parents evaluate quality or options in their school, or help them be better advocates for their child. Third-party resources that fall in this category include the Public Education Network’s Community Action Guide to Teaching Quality ([www.publiceducation.org/tqguide.asp](http://www.publiceducation.org/tqguide.asp)); The Education Trust’s “ABC’s of AYP” and “A New Core Curriculum for All” ([www.edtrust.org](http://www.edtrust.org)); and the National Governors Association series of Governors Guides on a range of issues, including literacy, teacher quality, testing and accountability ([www.nga.org](http://www.nga.org)). These can be pitched to reporters and offered as a source for story ideas and link to more information for their readers. Greatschools.net, which brings complicated school data down to earth for parents and the public in all 50 states, has several partnerships with media outlets, including AOL, MSN, Knight Ridder, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *San Diego Union Tribune*, the *Arizona Republic*, the *Dallas Morning News*, the *Orlando Sentinel* and the *Miami Herald*. The partnerships feature tips for parents and an online tool to make comparisons and learn

more about local schools and factors that affect student achievement ([www.azcentral.com/news/education/greatschools/gsfamestanford.html](http://www.azcentral.com/news/education/greatschools/gsfamestanford.html), [www.philly.com/mld/inquirer/living/special\\_packages/school\\_report\\_card/](http://www.philly.com/mld/inquirer/living/special_packages/school_report_card/)).

**Human interest** angles bring a story to life. They include stories of real people and their triumphs, tragedies and experiences. Find classroom examples that illustrate the concept you're trying to convey — teaching special needs students, using test data to make changes in instruction, etc. The *Detroit Free Press* featured a series on reading efforts in local schools linked to No Child Left Behind. The series followed the progress of a local first-grade class “as students seek to open their windows to the world by learning to read” ([www.freep.com/news/education/reading.htm](http://www.freep.com/news/education/reading.htm)).

**Trends** suggest patterns in policy, attitudes, opinions or practices. They gain attention. There is a trend; find at least three examples to assert that a new trend is emerging in parent involvement, professional development, students taking more college-prep classes, etc. Or, identify trends in test scores that identify progress or areas where more support and intervention is needed. A *Chicago Sun-Times* story compared the declining dropout rates of Hispanic students with other groups of students and examined some of the complex factors in shifting dropout rates ([www.suntimes.com/output/education/cst-nws-hisp13.html](http://www.suntimes.com/output/education/cst-nws-hisp13.html)).

**Time lines/calendar** opportunities offer pegs for news stories. With creativity, summer vacation can provide hooks to talk about parental involvement, sharpening reading skills, etc. “Back to school” can be a hook for many education stories. Testing dates, the release of report card data and professional development institutes are other significant events to include on your news calendar.

**Announcements** about programs to help schools on the “needs improvement” list, new reports or policies make news. However, make sure your news announcement is “new” — fresh and relevant. Making your announcement at a turnaround school is a good way to applaud innovation and demonstrate what is possible and provide a visual setting for television. Michigan Governor Granholm’s announcement at a turnaround elementary school offered a host of newsmaking material and was covered by every local television news affiliate. It featured an announcement of a series of *new* programs to help struggling schools and students; released data that could be used to make comparisons; and featured principals, teachers and students. Other states have made effective use of celebration announcements of the schools that are coming off the “needs improvement” lists or have made significant gains.

**Localize a national story** (and vice versa). Take a nationally breaking story and emphasize its local impact, i.e., how the new federal education accountability system is affecting students and teachers in your community’s schools. The new federal definition of a “highly qualified” teacher is an opportunity to examine teaching quality in local schools and to look beyond licensing and certification for other qualities and professional development efforts that improve teaching. Ohio localized state and national achievement gap data by recognizing “Schools of Promise” — schools with a poverty level of 50 percent or higher and where at least 75 percent of the students have passed the math and/or reading portions of the proficiency tests. Superintendent Susan Zelman’s quote — “These schools demonstrate that demographics should not determine a student's academic destiny”

— was picked up in several news stories about the schools. News coverage also pointed to the comprehensive reforms and stepped-up reading focus in the “Schools of Promise” that likely lead to the improvements  
([www.enquirer.com/editions/2003/06/10/loc\\_skulaward10.html](http://www.enquirer.com/editions/2003/06/10/loc_skulaward10.html)).

**Anniversaries/milestones** and “on this date” stories are easy to plan and prepare for and are a major “newshook” for many editors. One year later, one decade later. For example, The Education Trust used the anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education* to draw attention to the achievement gap among different groups of students.

**Fresh angle on an old story.** Take an old story and put a fresh twist on it. Example: compare teacher licensing requirements to that of other professions, or compare diagnostic tests used in the classroom to those used in the doctor’s office.

**Personality profiles** may feature individuals, community leaders or galvanizing spokespersons who may become news themselves because their story is compelling and they represent an “up and coming” leader. Find an outstanding teacher, parent leader, student or principal to tell reporters about. The *Charlotte Observer* profiled one high school graduate who, thanks to the devotion and extra support of a caring teacher, overcame great adversity to graduate and apply for college  
([www.charlotte.com/mld/charlotte/living/education/6068642.htm](http://www.charlotte.com/mld/charlotte/living/education/6068642.htm)).

**Strange bedfellows** that involve unlikely allies coming together over an issue make provocative news stories. Turning around low-performing schools requires a strong alliance of stakeholders. There should be no shortage of unusual alliances to cover in the effort to improve schools. Frustrated by continuing academic difficulties among poor children and ethnic minorities, an alliance of teachers, administrators, school board members and community leaders, who usually come together around broader issues like budgets and school bonds, decided to get really specific. This *Seattle Times* story reports on how the group came together to create a districtwide literacy team and place a full-time literacy-instruction coach in every elementary and middle school  
([www.seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/education/134987049\\_reading13m.html](http://www.seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/education/134987049_reading13m.html)).

#### **4. Rally stakeholders and build third-party voices**

---

**Don’t go solo in talking to reporters** about low-performing schools. Coordinate your efforts with key stakeholders and identify third-party voices that can help amplify and reinforce your message. Mass Insight ([www.massinsight.com](http://www.massinsight.com)) is an excellent example of an effective communications partner continually providing messages and evidence necessary to persuade target audiences to stay the course of higher standards. Similarly, Washington state’s Partnership for Learning ([www.partnership4learning.org](http://www.partnership4learning.org)) provides educators, parents and community leaders with information and advice. Keep a list of third-party spokespeople and share it with reporters and editors.

**Coordinate your message** and information resources with school administrators, teachers, parents and community leaders. This will ensure that all public messages are consistent, reliable and authoritative. Such coordination also will help you weather

inevitable storms of confusion, controversy and opposition, because trusted sources embedded in your community (parents, teachers and community leaders) will be able to quickly quash rumors and skepticism.

**Regularly convene conference calls or meetings with stakeholders** to provide them with background information and a preview of new changes. Notify them that this year's list of low-performing schools will likely be larger than previous years' and explain the new focus on ensuring that all groups of students make progress. Under the old system, achievement gaps among different groups of students were masked, making it difficult to target help to students who needed it. North Carolina's department of education hosts quarterly conference calls to keep its stakeholders in the loop.

## **5. Regularly evaluate your progress and make midcourse corrections**

---

**Juxtapose your message and media plan with your clip files** and scouting report outlined in #2. Determine which messages are penetrating and which aren't. Are there issues that require more aggressive, unfiltered tactics, such as opinion-editorials and letters to the editor? Are misunderstandings developing that require outreach to specific reporters and editors?

**Take the long view.** News coverage of the announcement of schools on the "needs improvement" list represent the *first* chapters in an evolving story. Subsequent coverage will focus on what's being done to improve them, the options available to parents with children in the "needs improvement" schools, and the inevitable disagreements and confusion about the best way to comply with the law. Keep your focus on pitching the *next* story about solutions and announcements of progress. Demonstrate a progression of action devoted to making continuous progress that serves all students better.

**Practice selective engagement and don't repeat the negative.** You likely will not agree with every story and may be disappointed about the coverage opposition voices receive. Don't get distracted and drawn into responding to every point of disagreement. Evaluate carefully whether a response is truly warranted. Responding to cynical spin may only fuel more negativity. If a response is necessary, keep it positive and focused on solutions. Don't repeat your opposition's negative message. It will only give it credence.