



How to Get Gun-Shy Schools to Open Their Doors

Armed with knowledge and good will, reporters can find their way inside the classroom.

By Dale Mezzacappa

Journalists on the education beat often think they are caught in a bind: Educators complain reporters don't write enough about the good things happening in schools. But these same educators resist or even refuse to let reporters spend much time in their buildings.

Educators have a different point of view. They say they are always telling reporters about programs, initiatives, and events worth writing about. They say reporters aren't interested, preferring to focus on controversy, conflict, and mistakes.

The result: a tug of war that too rarely results in in-depth reporting on the primary business of schools: teaching and learning.

But there are ways to break that impasse. For starters, reporters need to be knowledgeable about district policies and mindful of a tightening net of privacy concerns and security issues surrounding children. Demonstrating that they've made an effort to learn about teaching and learning helps as well. Beyond that, they need to work hard at developing good relationships with teachers and principals and gaining their trust with complete and balanced reporting.

By concentrating on teaching and learning, journalists can blunt the adversarial edge that puts educators on the defensive and still write revealing, interesting, and hard-hitting stories. And those stories can be useful in building the relationships necessary to maintain access during a breaking news story or a crisis.

"We're craving to get more coverage so people can understand what's happening inside our classrooms or in our special programs," said Don Phillips, superintendent of the Poway Unified School District in San Diego and the president of the National Suburban Superintendents Association. "Newspapers tend not to want to report on everyday teaching and learning activities."

Some school leaders say that they would like to see more reporting on the instructional process. But they are wary of a classroom visit offering a snapshot that's unflattering. Permitting the sort of long-term access that a more ambitious project requires poses risks as well. If something untoward and unpredictable does happen, will the entire story be hijacked?

"There's always a risk," said Rich Bagin of the National School Public Relations Association. "We tell

people when we train them, if an article is more investigative or long term, there's always a chance other happenings may occur that skew what the whole thing will be about."

Erin Einhorn, who covers the city schools for the New York Daily News, said that principals are generally suspicious of her, even if she's proposing a feature story. Covering a district with 1,451 schools, each one of them with a school police officer barring the door, presents a special challenge. When news breaks, it usually means waiting outside and grabbing parents and students as they leave. Even then, sometimes, the school police will call the NYPD and threaten arrest unless she leaves the sidewalk.

New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg has given principals unprecedented authority over their own school buildings. Yet most principals say that they have to first get permission from the central office before speaking with Einhorn.

Among principals and superintendents, there are widely diverging views and attitudes toward the press, often depending on their prior experiences and personalities, and the character of their districts. But even where educators are willing, the logistics of access to schools have never been more intricate.

First, there are student privacy issues. For decades, out of concern that some students' whereabouts should not be made public because of domestic or custody problems, many districts have required parents to sign a document permitting their children to be photographed and interviewed. Generally, these forms are sent home at the beginning of the year and the responses kept on file at the school.

The Internet adds a whole new dimension to privacy concerns. More and more parents are refusing to consent to photographs or interviews, fearing their child will become vulnerable to predators or that his or her picture could wind up on a pornographic Web site.

"We have a couple every year, situations where parents came and were upset even though the stories had not been negative or cast a negative light on their children in any way," said Cecilia Cummings, chief communications officer of the Philadelphia school district. "They were upset their children's name or photos had appeared in a newspaper."

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE



While these fears may seem overblown, they present journalists with real challenges. “I’ve found that schools that have no issues with me being there with a photographer freak out when they think we’ll put kids’ pictures and IDs on the Web,” said Randi Weiner, the senior education reporter at The Journal News in Rockland County, N.Y. “I’ve had access pulled – or threatened to be pulled – because of it, even for so-called ‘good news’ stories.”

Second, there are security issues. Unfettered access to schools to wander halls and enter classrooms at will once was common but now is rare. Like other public agencies, schools have tightened access since Columbine and 9/11, and reporters are usually treated like anyone else. “Some reporters think that following protocol is a waste of time, but schools are cracking down on this,” said Bagin, of the school public relations association.

Third, in most states reporters have no more right to be in a school than any other member of the public. (Check the rules for your state. Some states grant journalists greater access.) The Freedom of Information Act is no help; the prevailing case law focuses on the school district’s responsibility to protect children. And courts also have upheld a principal’s right to deny access if he or she feels it will be disruptive to learning, a category open to broad interpretation.

Reporters should also shake the mindset that if a district is looking for coverage of a particular program, it can’t be a good story. Often it is, and can lead to even better ones.

Here are some press organizations that can help journalists with access issues:

www.ewa.org	Education Writers Association
www.ire.org	Investigative Reporters and Editors
www.rcfp.org	Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press
www.spj.org	The Society for Professional Journalists
www.splc.org	Student Press Law Center

Sites from education organizations that bolster the argument for access:

www.nsba.org/site/docs/34700/34647.pdf

National School Boards Association publication on marketing urban education

www.aasa.org/publications/content.cfm?ItemNumber=8468
(or <http://tinyurl.com/2lf2e8>)

Advice from American Association of School Administrators officer and school Superintendent Mark Keen to his peers on why it is important to grant journalists access.

Phillips, of Poway Unified, says his district has been using a program called AVID to help prepare some of its most disadvantaged students for college. He has been disappointed that there hasn’t been more interest in writing about the struggles those students face and the district’s efforts to help them succeed.

“If a reporter wanted to [shadow] a student for a week, to live life through the eyes of a student, we’d work to make that happen,” he said.

Other tips from reporters and school officials:

- Ask if the list of students who cannot be interviewed or photographed is up to date. That way the district cannot deny access after the fact.
- Never breach a promise not to photograph or interview a child on the list; be vigilant to prevent mistakes.
- Sit down with superintendents or principals at the beginning of the year and go over possible stories that focus on teaching and learning. If a principal has a pet program, use it to get to know teachers and make a larger point about instruction.
- If teachers or principals protest that the story will be disruptive to the educational process, do the reporting first and have the photographer come in later.
- Show skittish principals and teachers samples of your work.
- When granted access for a particular story, don’t veer off and write about something else. Short of a murder, the arrest of a teacher or a mass brawl, there are few things that would require dropping everything and changing direction. On the other hand, keep your eyes and ears open for other stories, including teachers teaching out of field, useless study halls, draconian discipline policies, and so forth. Be upfront about wanting to do more reporting on those issues.

The interest of the journalists and educators will never be exactly the same. But the good news is that reporting on classroom activities can be where the interests they have in common intersect most often, if reporters know how to take advantage of their access ■.



Dale Mezzacappa is an award-winning journalist who covered education for the Philadelphia Inquirer for 20 years. She left the paper in 2006.