



Press releases make advocacy more powerful

Tips from a newspaper veteran and school food activist

By Caroline Grannan

You've launched your effort to improve school lunch, met with school board members and the Student Nutrition director, and recruited other parents. Now, what can you do to add some momentum to your advocacy?

Consider an old-fashioned publicity campaign. The traditional press is often quite interested in school food issues, especially with Michelle Obama putting nutrition in the spotlight. And there are lots of benefits to getting some news headlines – more supporters, more credibility, more strength.

Do you have something to report? It can be an achievement, no matter how modest, or it can just be the launch of your campaign to make improvements.

The old standby press release is still an effective way to do your outreach. Start this project by doing some basic groundwork:

- **Make a press list.** For larger newspapers, the education reporter and the food reporter or editor may both be interested in school food issues, so target them both. For smaller newspapers and local broadcast media, look for any past coverage of anything related to school food or just school issues, and target reporters who did those stories. Even if your local newspaper has never covered the topic, look at the newspaper and its website, and radio/TV stations' websites, for local reporters' names.

It's fine to send the same information to multiple reporters and editors. As a courtesy, if you send it to more than one reporter or editor at the same publication or station, add a cc or note indicating that. It might be worth sending information to the editorial page too.

Make a point of following news coverage of school food issues online, locally and beyond. Add reporters to your press list as you read or hear relevant coverage.

- **Offer yourself as a source of comments on school food topics:** With reporters who have covered school food issues or education, contact them and let them know you're an advocate working to improve school meals, and that you're available as a source, for quotes or background information. Reporters are often eager (even desperate) for sources to quote in stories – it's not always as easy to get quotes as it may seem. If you know others who might be additional good sources, pass their contact information on too.

If you've helped out the reporter, he or she is much more likely to be responsive to you, needless to say.

- ***Create an organization that will be the source of your publicity.*** It's perfectly legitimate to create Smithtown Parents for Better School Food. It can consist of you and any cohort you want, whether it's your small group of allies or a large membership that you recruit. Just don't be deceptive about it. (In one past controversial advocacy effort run by one other parent and myself, we named our organization and referred to it as a “research and information project,” so as not to be accused of misrepresenting it as a membership organization.) You can write a brief description of your organization and use it as the last paragraph of each press release, and of course send out a press release about the launch of the organization.
- ***Be diplomatic and respectful to the press:*** That suggestion speaks for itself.

How to write a press release

Plenty of tutorials are available free online, like [this one](#)

Here are some thoughts based on publicizing school food advocacy over the years.

I've written three basic types of press release: the event announcement, the news alert about a new development that you're pitching as a story, and the longer press release that is written as though it *were* the news story.

The event announcement

Its purpose is to sell the reporter on mentioning the event beforehand, show up to cover it or both. But remember that even if neither of those happens, you never know when a mention might show up at some other time, and all publicity helps fuel the momentum of your project or crusade.

Basic tips:

- Write a headline that conveys the most important information. Use a subhead if you need it.
- Write a lead paragraph that incorporates the who/what/where/when, and “why” if that's relevant or necessary.
- Assume no prior knowledge.
For this short event announcement, give only the essential facts, with some basic background.

Here's a model:

Date

**HEADLINE: FREE SALAD DAY TO CELEBRATE OPENING OF
SMITH ELEMENTARY CAFETERIA SALAD BAR**

Subhead: District's first salad bar will be followed by one in every school by the end of the year

Contact: Name, working contact info for an accessible, knowledgeable source

Note: I think a “what/where/when” listing at the top is the most user-friendly for the reader:

What: Free Salad Day celebrating salad bar opening

Where: Smith Elementary School, 123 Main Street, Smithtown

When: Monday, March 28, Noon-1:30 p.m.

The Smith Elementary School community will celebrate the opening of the first salad bar in the Smithtown Unified School District with free salads for all students on Monday, March 28, from noon-1:30 p.m. in the school cafeteria.

The press is invited to the celebration at Smith Elementary, 123 Main Street, Smithtown. Due to space limitations, the event is not open to the public.

The salad bar is funded by a parcel tax approved by Smithtown voters last November, after a campaign launched by the organization Smith Elementary Parents for Healthy Kids. Salad bars will roll out in every Smithtown school by the end of this school year.

(traditional newspaper signal that this is the end of the article)

The story idea/tip press release

Here you're trying to sell the reporter on your story idea, given enough basic information. This may be announcing the launch of a campaign, the creation of an organization, an accomplishment such as a new limit on junk food sales, etc.

Basic tips:

- Write a headline that conveys the most interesting and important information. Add a subhead if that's helpful.
- Write a lead paragraph that incorporates the who/what/where/when, and “why” if that's relevant or necessary. Try to emphasize what's relevant and interesting about this idea.
- Assume no prior knowledge, so give some basic background and context (“only a few other schools around the nation have eliminated sports drink sales”).
- You may choose to use a quote supporting your point, the way you'd see it in a news story. It's fine to quote yourself. Or you can use the quote to provide more information, since you can have it say anything you want. That just makes the press release sound like a regular news story and generally more professional and interesting.
- In the news business, the traditional format for a regular news story is the “inverted pyramid,” giving the most important information in the first paragraph, then the next-most important, then the next. That's pretty oversimplified, but it's a general guideline.
- Provide sources – it's very helpful if you can give the reporter a name at the school district, a nutritionist and a celebrity chef to contact, or whatever fits in with your story. This can be a list at the beginning or end of your press release, labeled “Additional sources to contact” or something similar.

Full-length press release

This is the same concept as the story tip or announcement, except that in some cases it may be helpful to include more detail and quotes. In school food issues, I've done this at times because the background can be so complex. Try to make it sound like a real article.

For example, when our school district finally got a point-of-sale swipe-card system for the cafeterias, clarifying to the press why it was a breakthrough involved explaining the complex issues about overt identification of student who qualify for free/reduced-price meals. I think it was helpful to write up that background explanation to help the press understand it. I've also used quotes extensively in that kind of press release. It's legitimate for reporters to reuse the quote from the press release in finished articles, so that makes their job easier and ensures that they get pertinent and accurate quotes from informed

sources.

Basic tips:

- Write a headline that conveys the most interesting and important information. Add a subhead if that's helpful.
- Write a lead paragraph that incorporates the who/what/where/when, and “why” if that's relevant or necessary. Try to emphasize what's relevant and interesting about this idea.
- Assuming no prior knowledge, give as much background as is necessary to clarify the point of the article. (Pretend you're explaining it to an intelligent and interested but uninformed friend.)
- Feel free to use several quotes, which can be from yourself and/or others you are working with. They can be quotes explaining the reason behind a fact, or giving an opinion, or just providing some of the information: “The new swipe-card system means nobody can tell which are the low-income kids and which kids are paying for their lunch,” explained parent and school food advocate Caroline Grannan. “That eliminates the stigma for low-income students.”
- The inverted pyramid is a general model here too.
- Again, provide a list of sources.

Remember that even if the press doesn't respond to your press release this time, someone in the newsroom is reading it and getting the information – that may pay off the next time you send one, or in some other unpredicted way. All information that you send out adds to the momentum, so it's worth your effort!

Please send us your press release here at PEACHSF via our “Contact Us” feature so we can post it on our “Share Your Success” page and help spread the word even farther.

Caroline Grannan is a longtime San Francisco parent, volunteer, advocate and blogger, and has been working for improved school food since 2002. She is a journalist with a background as a newspaper editor and has specialized in communications on school food issues, informing the press and parents about breaking news, achievements and challenges in improving school food. She has served on the San Francisco Unified School District's Student Nutrition and Physical Activity Committee since 2003, and in 2004, was the author of a California State PTA resolution that made it policy for the nation's largest state PTA to advocate for healthy school food.

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