

Communications and Compliance with Fiscal Accountability Regulations

Separating Fact From Fiction

Public Relations vs. Communications

Within the Fiscal Accountability Regulations, there are restrictions to public relations activities, which the DOE defines as:

“public relations services include activities directly relating to promotional efforts that advance a particular position and/or communicate information to the news media and school district community at large through means such as press releases, press conferences, newsletters, flyers, mass community mailings and emails, television and radio broadcasting, and school-related community events.” (6A:23A-9.3(c)14i)

Proactive school communications = public information

→ Taxpayers in every community deserve to know what's happening in their local schools.

School Communication is more than PR

Every school district has an obligation to communicate with its stakeholders. The role of a school communications professional is much more than traditional PR.

Examples of non-PR duties:

- Branding
- Communication Planning
- Community relations
- Crisis communication
- Grant writing
- Internal Communication
- Letter writing - sensitive
- Public health communication
- Recruitment
- Social media
- Special events
- Strategic partnerships
- Surveys
- Website

Review of the Fiscal Accountability Regulations in Regards to Public Relations

6A:23A-5.2 Public relations and professional services; district board of education policies; efficiency

(a) Each district board of education of a school district and CVSD **shall establish by policy(ies)** a strategy(ies) **to minimize the cost of public relations** as defined in N.J.A.C. 6A:23A-9.3(c), and professional services. The policy(ies) shall include, to the extent practical and cost effective, but need not be limited to, the following provisions:

1. **A maximum dollar limit, established annually prior to budget preparation, for public relations**, as defined in N.J.A.C. 6A:23A-9.3(c), and each type of professional service, with appropriate notification to the district board of education if it becomes necessary to exceed the maximum. Upon such notification, the district board of education may adopt a dollar increase in the maximum amount through formal district board of education action;

6A:23A-9.3(c) Efficiency standards for review of administrative and non-instructional expenditures and efficient business practices

14. Public relations services are incorporated into the duties of the superintendent, SBA, and/or other staff position(s) and are not provided by a dedicated public relations staff position or contracted service provider. Public relations functions as defined in (c)14i and ii below **should not comprise more than 50 percent of the duties of any one staff position.**

- i. For the purpose of this paragraph, public relations services include activities directly relating to promotional efforts that advance a particular position and/or communicate information to the news media and school district community at large through means such as press releases, press conferences, newsletters, flyers, mass community mailings and emails, television and radio broadcasting, and school-related community events.
- ii. **Public relations activities do not include activities such as crisis communications, website maintenance, data collection and dissemination, school operations, and development of the school district calendar or handbook.**

MYTH:

Districts cannot pay for public relations assistance because of the accountability regulations.

FACT:

As we just shared, the regulations have some restrictions on PR, but districts can absolutely contract or hire for communications help.

How is it possible? Let us count the ways

Ways to Access School Communication Services

Hire an experienced school communications professional (PT/FT)

Create a hybrid position
(communications with another position)

Contract for shared service

Contract with private firm

Communications Staff Position

- Full time staff position can be essential to communicating your district's news, initiatives, budget and capital projects, mission, brand, etc.
- Job description for a full-time staff position should focus on communications and not on public relations so you are in compliance with the regulations. Make sure the PR functions listed in job description represent less than 50% of the total responsibilities.
 - Consider using generic job title as well, such as Communications Coordinator, Public Information Officer, Community Outreach Coordinator

Communications Staff Position, cont.

- Full time staff position can include a variety of responsibilities beyond PR, such as:
 - Crisis communications
 - Managing parent notification system
 - Internal communications and staff intranet
 - Recruitment
 - Webmaster
 - Social media
 - Strategic Planning
- A strong communicator can fill many needs within your district office.

Hybrid Position

- You can consider creating a hybrid position, though use caution unless you can find a person who has a strong skill set in both areas.
 - Examples from NJSPRA members: Director of Technology and Communications, Director of Human Resources and Communications
- Some school districts have added Webmaster to the job title to clearly showcase the job is not just public relations.
 - Example: Communications Manager/Webmaster

Contracting for Shared Service or Private Firm

- Districts are allowed to contract for shared services or hire a private firm for communication services. They cannot contract for strictly PR help per the accountability regulations.
- Budget for communication services must be established in annual budget.
- Examples of shared services or help from a private firm:
 - Bond referendum, Branding, Communication planning, Community/Business Partnerships, Crisis Communication, Direct mail, Grant writing, Media relations, Newsletter creation, Professional development, Social media strategy, Strategic communications, Website content support

Developing Your School Communication Skills

The New Jersey School Public Relations Association (NJSPRA) is a state chapter of the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), nationally recognized for its efforts on behalf of school communication professionals.

www.njspra.com

- As of February 2023, 117 members -
 - 75% communication professionals
 - 20% Superintendents
 - 5% other admin or tech personnel
- Membership includes:
 - Three full day workshops
 - Networking with school communication pros
 - Annual Meeting Dinner
 - School Communication Awards
 - Communicator of the Year Award

More PD available through NSPRA:

www.nspira.org

