

Policy

Somerset County Board of Education

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Subject: Guidelines for Releasing School System & Individual School Information	Date Revised: September 16, 2003 August 17, 2004 May 16, 2006 December 16, 2008 August 21, 2012 Date Approved: June 15, 1999 June 20, 2006 January 20, 2009 September 18, 2012 Effective Date: September 16, 2003 August 17, 2004 June 20, 2006 January 20, 2009 September 18, 2012

1. Purpose

The Somerset County Board of Education recognizes that the activities of the public education system of this county are a matter of public interest and as such, the news media will frequently want access to schools and to students and to have the opportunity to report on the educational, as well as extra curricular activities, of students, both on a group and individual basis. The Board believes that public knowledge and awareness of the activities of the school system is in the best interest of the Board of Education and that the exposure to the news media can be of educational benefit to the students under appropriate and properly controlled circumstances. Accordingly, it is the policy of the Somerset County Board of Education, subject to the provisions and conditions of this policy and full safety precautions, to allow the news media access, including the opportunity to videotape, photograph and report on educational activities, as well as extra curricular activities, of students.

2. Policy

A. **County-**The superintendent or his/her designee is responsible for:

- (1) The development and dissemination of information and publications that describe system-wide programs, practices and achievements.
- (2) The development of communication procedures for releasing information to the community. All information distributed to the public should be accurate. Press releases and news advisories should be distributed in a timely manner. The definition of timely manner will vary with the type of release or advisory.
 - (a) Information pertaining to a pending Board or school meeting in which key information will be discussed or important decisions rendered should be disseminated to the news media no later than seven to ten work days prior to the meeting (s).

Somerset County Board of Education
Policy 200-21
Page 2

- (b) For a crisis situation within the school system, press releases and news advisories should be distributed within one to two hours of the occurrence. The Public Information Officer (PIO) will provide accurate information to the news media after collaboration with the crisis management team. If the PIO is not available, the Supervisor of Secondary Education will assume PIO responsibilities followed by the Supervisor of Human Resources.
- (c) Press releases and news advisories pertaining to programs, practices and achievements should be released to the news media no more than seven to ten work days prior to or after programs, practices or achievements.
- (3) Providing guidance and assistance to administrators and other employees in communicating with the public in a manner that protects the privacy, security, as well as due process rights of students and staff.
- (4) Maintaining regular contact with news media.
- (5) The maintenance of an environment where all school system employees are aware that they share the responsibility for good public relations.

B. School

- (1) At all times the ~~At~~ news media representatives should make contact with the Somerset County Public Relations Office to visit schools for interviews for positive routine school news or a crisis situation. The PIO is responsible to speak to a media representative unless direction can be given to the principal to participate in the interview. The Office of Public Relations will assist the schools throughout the year and may be contacted for assistance by schools or the news media.
- (2) When the news media inquires about a crisis, ethical problem, legal problem, student or staff misbehavior or any other serious situation, the Office of Public Relations must be contacted initially by the media reporter who will meet with the Public Information Officer (PIO.)
- (3) The school principal is responsible for the timely release of information about his/her individual school to the Public Information Officer. Although the principal retains ultimate responsibility within the school, he/she may appoint a member of the staff to prepare and disseminate press releases, public service announcements, calendar of events, and newsletters. All members of the school staff should be informed that suggestions for press releases and news articles are welcomed and should be channeled through the principal or his/her designee. However, the Office of Public Relations will release all school press releases. All press releases must be sent to the PIO for approval.
- (4) News media representatives should not report to a school or the school principal unless directed to do so by the-PIO. Media representatives must contact the PIO before visiting any school or the central office. The principal or his/her designee will accompany the media representatives while they are in a school building or on school grounds for the reporting of positive routine school news. The PIO and the principal will accompany the reporter in the school during a crisis or other serious situations.

Somerset County Board of Education
Policy 200-21
Page 3

- (5) Interviews with students, photographs of students, or videotaping of students may be granted or denied at the discretion of the principal and or the PIO. However, none of the aforementioned is allowed if:
 - a student does not have a signed parental/guardian media permission slip on file in the school office; (See 200-21AP)
 - a student is grieving; and
 - A student is to be asked a personal question.
- (6) A principal may deny media access to a school facility if it would interrupt a scheduled activity/instructional program, judged not to be in the best interest of the students and staff or is a potentially controversial topic or sensitive issue.
- (7) In releasing any information to the news media, established policies of confidentiality of student records and policies protecting the privacy and security of students and staff must be followed.
- (8) Employees of the Somerset County Public Schools are encouraged to respond accurately and forthrightly to questions asked by media representatives. Employees should refer the media representatives to the appropriate administrator in cases where:
 - (a) The subject transcends the employee's area of responsibility or expertise.
 - (b) There is some reasonable doubt about the nature of the subject under discussion.
- (9) All efforts should maintain a balance between the public's right to know, confidentiality and the school system's need to consider and discuss school issues before information are released.

C. Emergency Situations – There are certain situations when the school system has an obligation to protect the privacy, security, as well as the due process rights of students and staff. The instances may preclude giving the media representatives access to the school facility, until the situation has been stabilized.

- During an emergency, the superintendent or his/her designee should be notified immediately.
- The primary responsibility of the principal is to address the emergency, ensure the safety of students and staff, and establish stability within the school facility.
- In response to media inquiries, one person should be named as spokesperson (principal, superintendent, or his/her designee). **This is the Public Information Officer.** This person will be responsible for releasing information to media representatives. The first media statement should contain two parts: an assurance statement and an insurance statement. The first assures the public that accurate and timely information will be provided. The second statement should emphasize the protection of the main functions of the school safety and student learning.
- The designated spokesperson should continue to provide updated information until the emergency situation is passed.

D. Maintenance of Free and Reduced Price Meal Eligibility Enrollment

- (1) The Head Manager of Food Services will generate list of F/R eligibility additions and changes by school each month (after 10/31) and forward it to the Data Specialist Associate.
- (2) Withdrawals and transfers will be handled by the Data Specialist Associate.
- (3) All requests for data involving F/R status will be directed to the Supervisor of Technology who will see that the information is generated in percentage or other format that does not reveal individual student information.

E. Release of Free and Reduced Price Meal Eligible Student Identification for Approved Supplemental Educational Services

- Requests for F/R student specific information will be directed to the Head Manager of Food Services.
- The Somerset County Public Schools Release Agreement must accompany each request.
- Questions regarding the legitimacy of the requested use will be resolved by the superintendent.
- Unless alternative dates are specified, F/R data provided will be from 10/31 official data. If alternative dates are specified, data will be based on “official” first of month data.

F. Audio or Videotaping and/or Photographing of Students

Parents/guardians may request that individual photographs, audio or videotapes, interviews, and related information concerning their child or children not be used outside of the school system by completing and returning the Somerset County Acceptable Use and Media Release Form to their child’s school. This form will not prevent audio or videotaping and/or pictures as described in section M of Board policy 500-14.