

# NSPRA This Week – Tip of the Week

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*Source: Julie Ellis, director of public relations, Owensboro (Ky.) Independent School District, [jellis@owensboro.k12.ky.us](mailto:jellis@owensboro.k12.ky.us)*

### Support Staff — On the PR Front Line

Who is the first contact for students each morning? Who greets parents when they call the school? Chances are pretty good that it is the school bus driver, the lunchroom staff member, a classroom assistant, or the school secretary.

Support staff set the tone for the school. They are on the *front line* of good school PR. Taking time to provide PR training tips to support staff can go a long way toward making your district's image a positive one.

A 30- to 45-minute workshop for bus drivers, secretaries, teaching assistants, cafeteria staff and custodians is a great PR investment. Creating awareness of their roles and influence is half the battle.

#### 10 PR tips that can be adapted for any group of employees

1. **“I am my school district.”** Strong statement? Not at all. Each employee represents his or her school in the eyes of students, parents, and community. Happy employees create a positive image.
2. **Encourage staff to adopt a good “customer service” attitude on the job.** Just as businesses must provide good customer service to attract customers, schools exist to serve their customers—students, parents, and the community. Adopt a “customer friendly” atmosphere.
3. **As a school employee — whether the principal or the custodian — each of us is an “authority” on our school in the eyes of the community.** Keeping employees informed of positive “talking points” helps keep a good message going to the public. Give them the bad news, too. Whether it is good or bad, they need to know it first so that they will have accurate information when someone asks.
4. **Keep confidences.** Confidentiality extends far beyond locking up the grade book. It extends to casual conversations with friends about a child in the classroom who is always in trouble or the parent who was ugly on the phone. A casual conversation in the grocery about how bad “Johnny” was in class today may be overheard by Johnny’s neighbor who happens to be shopping on the same aisle.
5. **What to say or not say in a crisis!** Train employees about their roles in crisis situations. Often the first person in contact with the public after something happens is the school

secretary or a bus driver. If a bomb scare or bus accident occurs, the secretary or bus driver needs to know school policy for commenting to reporters or to parents. Provide guidelines such as instructions to refer all questions to the appropriate spokesperson.

6. **What is your phone personality?** Upbeat? Bland? Short? A friendly, professional voice at the other end of the phone can make or break your image as a welcoming school. A cordial voice sets the tone for any conversation. Offer as much assistance as possible to the caller in a calm, friendly tone. A cordial voice often calms an angry caller. *P.S.* Always return calls and deliver messages promptly.
7. **Keep your job and home in balance.** Whenever possible, leave personal problems at home and, likewise, leave work problems at school.
8. **Don't gossip about students or other employees.** Gossip never helps anyone and it can hurt everyone. And, it usually isn't accurate.
9. **Choose your attitude.** Choose to be positive. Yes, you really can make a choice! A positive attitude is a lot more fun than the alternative.
10. **Teamwork fosters a positive climate.** Include support staff in training, on teams and committees, in social events, on district web mail, etc. Value every member of the team.

#### **Good resources for support staff training**

NSPRA's *Unlocking Sensational Service: Tools for Tapping the People Power in Your Schools*.

NSPRA's *Principal Communicator* newsletter offers good tips for staff PR.

NSPRA's *Principals in the Public—Engaging Community Support*

NSPRA's *School Public Relations—Building Confidence in Education*

The Fish! Philosophy ([www.fishphilosophy.com](http://www.fishphilosophy.com)) is a great attitude-building workshop.

For more information and to learn more about the National School Public Relations Association, please visit [www.nspra.org](http://www.nspra.org).