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Student Success

 **InnovateEDU®**



Proven & Powerful:
A Guide to Media and Messaging for Student
Support Providers

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PROVEN AND POWERFUL: A GUIDE TO MEDIA AND MESSAGING FOR STUDENT SUPPORT PROVIDERS

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide from the Partnership for Student Success and InnovateEDU is designed to help providers of evidence-based, people-powered K-12 student supports share their stories through news media. This guide aims to assist organizations in showcasing the impact of their programs at the local and national levels. The guide includes practical, step-by-step guidance on pitching stories to reporters, building strategic relationships with the media, and handling incoming media inquiries. It also offers a breakdown of tested messages that resonate across a range of stakeholder groups and political affiliations, which may be helpful in telling your story.

HOW TO PITCH YOUR STORY TO REPORTERS

Preparing Your Story

Before sharing your story with potential reporters, you must identify the structural integrity of your narrative. Strong stories about evidence-based student supports often combine a human-centered positive impact with a heavy-hitting data point.

- **Identify the Angle:** Why is this story worth writing and sharing now?
 - Op-Ed/Written Commentary: When you want to shift the narrative on research, evidence, or new data.
 - Video News Release/Feature: When there is a strong visual impact to share that corresponds with the human-focused story.
 - Event Invitation: Save these for high-energy milestone events where there are interviews and photo opportunities.
 - Subject Matter Expert: This isn't just a specific angle pitch; this is a chance to offer your leadership as a neutral resource on a topic for any future coverage.
- **Format:** Your pitch should be tailored to the medium you are pitching. Refer to the table below for guidance:

Content Type	Recommended Length	Rationale
Op-Ed / Guest Essay	600 - 750 words	Most major outlets (New York Times, EdWeek, The 74) will reject anything over 800 words.
Pitch Email	150 - 200 words	Reporters scan on mobile. If they have to scroll, they stop reading.
B-Roll / Raw Video	2 - 3 minutes	Provide a highlight reel of high-quality clips, so the news station can edit their own timeframe.
Produced Social Video	60 - 90 seconds	The hook must happen in the first three seconds.
Press Release	1 Page preferred (2 pages maximum)	Use the inverted pyramid framing (most critical info at the top, background at the bottom).

HOW TO PITCH YOUR STORY TO REPORTERS

- **Make it Unique:** Distinguish your work from the status quo and/or from other programs that offer similar services. Emphasize how your story has a positive impact on students and communities.
- **Emphasize the Human Element:** The hook is the story, and the hook is often a human. Many successful media pitches tie in a human element. In this case, it can be a student, a mentor, or an educator whose journey illustrates your program's systemic impact. It's important to note, however, that this is not a requirement for every pitch in order for it to be successful.
 - The following tips should guide your decision on whether or not to implement the human element with fidelity and empathy:
 - Consider individuals' capacity and comfort in responding to reporter inquiries.
 - Ensure proper consent and protect student privacy. Before sharing the story of a student, educator, or community member in an identifiable manner, obtain consent from the person (or the parent/guardian in the case of a student) through a media release or similar agreement.
 - If the story describes a sensitive or potentially stigmatizing issue, consider changing the name(s) of individuals described in your story for privacy. (Disclose that you are using a pseudonym for transparency)
 - Use first names for general storytelling to maintain a personal feel while protecting privacy.

Building Relationships with Reporters

Think of reporters as strategic partners, not just megaphones.

Effective media relations are built on uncommon alliances before the deadline pressure hits.

- **Tailor the Pitch:** Don't blast every reporter. Before you draft anything, you must determine where your story belongs. There are "beats" for news reporting, but selecting the right angle for your story is key.



HOW TO PITCH YOUR STORY TO REPORTERS

Refer to the table below to help determine the best route to take for your pitch:

Category	Description	Example Publications	Strategy Pitch	Objective
Education Trade Press	Outlets specifically dedicated to business, policy, and practice of K12 education	<i>EdWeek, EdSurge, K-12 Dive, The 74, District Administration</i>	Research, data, systemic shifts	Influence district and school leaders, other education practitioners
Local & Regional News	Local city newspaper, regional TV news, community digital sites	<i>Boston Globe (education section), local ABC/NBC/CBS affiliates</i>	Local impact, human element	Secure local district buy-in
National News	High-reach outlets that cover broad societal trends	<i>New York Times, Washington Post, NPR, Forbes, USA Today</i>	Bright spot in a larger national narrative	Shape the national conversation

HOW TO PITCH YOUR STORY TO REPORTERS

To help with the decision-making process, here is an example of the decision flow to determine your publication outlet:



HOW TO PITCH YOUR STORY TO REPORTERS

- **Follow the Lead:** Follow publications and individual reporters who cover the education beat, particularly those focused on priorities that relate to your work (for example, high-impact tutoring, serving vulnerable students, chronic absenteeism, etc.).
- **Keep it Neutral:** Send them a high-quality report or a relevant article without asking for a story. Establish yourself as a subject matter expert that they would be excited to work with.
- **Personal Touch:** When possible, invite a reporter for a personal conversation. This doesn't have to be a pitch, just a 15-minute sync on the trends you're seeing in the field (e.g. related to student supports broadly, chronic absenteeism, etc.). This can be in-person, via a virtual meeting, or over the phone.
 - **Key preparation tip:** A personal meeting could turn into an opportunity to make a pitch. Come to the meeting with a concept or idea ready if the situation presents itself or the reporter makes a direct ask.



Checklist for a Strong Pitch

Use this checklist to ensure your pitch is clear, concise, and ready for the 24-hour news cycle.

Phase 1: Before the Pitch

- ✓ **Determine the Timeline:** Considering internal/external factors, when is an ideal time for my story to be published?
- ✓ **Identify the Target:** Does this publication and reporter cover my specific topic?
- ✓ **Refine the Hook:** Is the first sentence punchy and relevant to a current trend?
- ✓ **Gather the Evidence:** Do I have specific data points that relate to my topic?
- ✓ **Ready the Human Element:** Is a student or educator cleared and available to speak or highlight in my story?

HOW TO PITCH YOUR STORY TO REPORTERS

Phase 2: During the Pitch

- ✓ **Keep it Short & Sweet:** Is the email under 200 words?
- ✓ **Subject Line Integrity:** Does it clearly state the news? (e.g., “New Data: 25% Increase in Math Scores via High-Impact Tutoring”)
- ✓ **Be Direct and Clear:** Did I clearly state if I want an interview, provide the content directly, or something else? Review for obvious AI syntax and make necessary edits; reporters often weed out requests that contain obvious AI language.

Phase 3: After the Pitch

- ✓ **Follow Up:** If you haven't heard back in 48 hours, send a brief, respectful bump.
- ✓ **Rapid Response:** If they reply, do you have everything ready to coordinate a response?
- ✓ **Pitch Again:** If they pass, be prepared to send the story to a different publication. Consider shifting the timeline and pitch language.
- ✓ **Ask for Copy:** If story is picked up, ask for a copy of the publication to be shared via email once it is published.

Looking for more tips for a strong pitch? Check out the [State of Journalism 2026 from Muck Rack](#).



HOW TO RESPOND TO REPORTER INQUIRIES

Reporters often seek immediate “hot takes” to meet a deadline. Never agree to an interview on the spot. Use a standardized holding statement to buy time to prepare for the interview and ensure strategic alignment with your team. If the opportunity to respond is a good fit for your organization, aim to schedule a time with the reporter within two business days.

Sample script: “Thank you for reaching out. To ensure I provide the most accurate data and the most relevant success stories for your piece, I need to coordinate with my communications team. So I can help you meet your deadline, when do you need to hear back from me with a potential response?”

Gathering the Details

Before committing to an interview, your primary task is to gather the request's technical specs. Engage communications staff or relevant advisors quickly while you determine whether to commit. Consider the following:

- **The Source:** Reporter's name, outlet (national vs. local), and their typical beat, if applicable.
- **The Logistics:** Hard deadline, requested interview format (live TV, recorded audio, or print), and the expected time commitment.
- **The News Angle and Audience:** What is the external angle driving this story (actual or anticipated)? Who will benefit from this story (i.e., who is the intended audience)?
- **The Risks and Opportunities:** What are the potential risks and opportunities if my organization participates in this interview? Do the potential opportunities outweigh the potential risks? This is particularly important for investigative reporters.
- **The Scope:** Are they speaking to other organizations or stakeholders? Is this a solo feature or a roundup where you are one of many voices or programs?

HOW TO RESPOND TO REPORTER INQUIRIES

Preparing for Interviews

Once an interview is confirmed, you must transition from response mode to preparation mode. Do not wing it. This preparation is crucial pre-interview work that impacts the larger compilation of the story to be told.

Defining the Audience

Tailor your narrative to the specific stakeholder group the reporter reaches:

- **Parents:** Focus on personalized attention, confidence-building, and individual student growth. Demonstrate how these supports provide their child with a dedicated champion who closes learning gaps and ignites a passion for education.
- **Policymakers:** Focus on scalability, return on investment (ROI), bipartisan support, and evidence of impact.
- **Educators, Education Leaders, and Practitioners:** Focus on reducing administrative burden and classroom efficacy.



Identifying Hot Topics

Identify potential hot topics or sensitive subjects in the narrative before the reporter does. Hot topics may vary by program and story, but could include topics like:

- **Cost:** High-impact tutoring, success coaching, and other evidence-based supports can be costly. Be prepared to discuss return on investment and why the cost is worth it, and/or how districts are paying for these supports in times of constraint.
- **Quality Implementation:** [Recent research](#) highlights the importance of implementing with fidelity—particularly in tutoring—for strong student outcomes, leading some to question whether it is possible to implement with quality. Be ready to share how your program ensures quality despite implementation challenges.
- **Scale Challenges:** Be honest but optimistic about the scale challenges your program might face, such as recruitment, retention, or expansion to serve more students or sites.

HOW TO RESPOND TO REPORTER INQUIRIES

Preparing Your Evidence

Never go into an interview without three heavy-hitting talking points (be sure to include data when applicable). These are the pillars that keep your story from collapsing under scrutiny: rigor, demand, and impact.

- **Rigor:** (e.g., "Our tutoring model has undergone rigorous research and demonstrates average student growth of #.")
- **Demand:** (e.g., "95% of teachers believe every student can benefit from a mentor, yet only 20% are receiving that support.")
- **Impact:** A bright spot or positive impact story of a specific student whose life was changed by your program.

Golden Rules of Reporter Communication

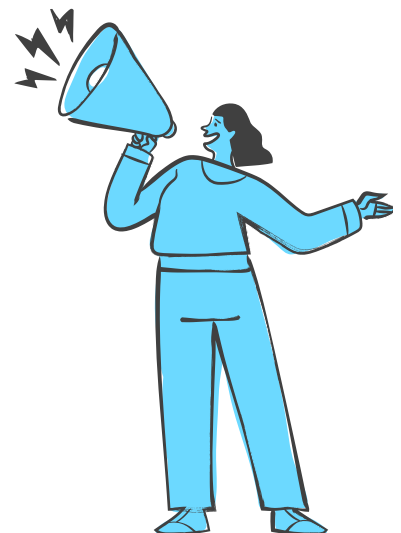
Golden Rule 1: Everything is On the Record

Assume the mic is always hot. There is no such thing as "off the record." Casual small talk before or after the official interview can be included in the story.

Golden Rule 2: You Design the Narrative

The reporter provides the questions; you provide the map. Use their questions as a bridge to the key messages you prepared.

- The Bridging Technique, example:
 - **Reporter:** "Critics say tutoring is too expensive to sustain. Why would districts adopt such a costly solution?"
 - **Your Response:** "What the research tells us is that high-impact tutoring is one of the most cost-effective interventions for long-term learning gains. Let me share how we are architecting sustainable funding models..."



HOW TO RESPOND TO REPORTER INQUIRIES

Golden Rule 3: Human Impact Over Technical Jargon

Translate education speak into relatable student success stories.

- **DON'T SAY THIS:** "We are implementing a Tier 2 MTSS framework with high-dosage tutoring."
- **SAY THIS INSTEAD:** "We are ensuring that every student who falls behind has a dedicated tutor who supports them in math three times a week to get them back on track."

Golden Rule 4: Stay in Your Strategic Lane

Only speak to what you know. If a question falls outside your area of expertise, defer to others in your network.

- **Example:** "That's a great question for an organization like MENTOR, which conducts research and supports mentoring programs nationally. I can connect you with the right expert for that data if it would be helpful."

Golden Rule 5: Pivot Negative Questions to Positive Solutions

Never repeat a reporter's negative premise. If they ask about failure, reframe the conversation to talk about opportunities for evidence-based growth.

Checklist for a Strong Interview

Before the Interview

- ✓ I know the news angle (Why is this story happening now?)
- ✓ I have my three key talking points (with corresponding data) ready
- ✓ I have a bright spot or positive impact story ready to share if the timing is right / need comes up during the interview
- ✓ I have anticipated possible risks or tricky questions
- ✓ If time permits, I have practiced my interview and/or shared my key talking points for feedback with a colleague or advisor

HOW TO RESPOND TO REPORTER INQUIRIES

During the Interview

- ✓ I am treating the reporter as a sophisticated decision-maker who wants to tell the story
- ✓ I am speaking in “soundbites” (15-20 second, clear statements)
- ✓ I am smiling (even on the phone—it changes the vibe and energy of the conversation)
- ✓ I am bringing the conversation back to my key talking points and my organization's mission at every opportunity.



After the Interview

- ✓ I have debriefed with my communications team or relevant staff/advisors
 - ✓ If I anticipate that the story will be positive, I have a plan to share the story with my network once it is published.
 - ✓ If I anticipate that the story will be negative, I have a risk mitigation plan.
- ✓ I have sent any promised research, resources, or links discussed during the interview
- ✓ I have sent a thank-you note to the reporter and asked about the publication timeline

TESTED MESSAGES THAT RESONATE

To build positive public perception of our shared work and secure earned media, programs may consider integrating messages that resonate with a range of stakeholder groups and political affiliations. The following themes are backed by recent polling and research and may help tell your story, depending on your program and audience.

Tutoring

Tutoring has been a consistently popular educational intervention among parents and voters across political affiliations in recent years.

- **Evidence of impact:** High-impact tutoring is among the most effective academic interventions for accelerating student learning, [with over 150 randomized controlled trials](#) demonstrating its effectiveness. High-impact tutoring can lead to substantial learning gains for students by supplementing (but not replacing) students' classroom experiences. [Learn more about the research behind high-impact tutoring.](#)
- **Broad popularity among parents:** Based on [polling from 50CAN](#), 86% of parents strongly or somewhat favor free tutoring for K-12 students who fall behind grade level. This level of support is higher than any other structure or policy that 50CAN tested, including free summer camp, open enrollment, annual standardized testing, charter schools, and school vouchers.
- **Bipartisan support:** Free tutoring is supported by people with a range of political affiliations. It was the only policy or structure in [50CAN's February 2026 report](#) for which every major party affiliation indicated at least 50% "strong support."
- **Significant unmet demand:** Parents report significant levels of unmet demand for tutoring. [EdChoice polling from October 2025](#) indicates that while 19% of parents had children receiving tutoring, another 24% were actively seeking tutoring or planning to do so soon. Similarly, in a [nationally representative survey of public school principals](#) conducted by the RAND Corporation and the Partnership for Student Success, principals reported an increase in student need for high-intensity tutoring between

TESTED MESSAGES THAT RESONATE

the 2023-24 and 2024-25 school years, noting that large proportions of students in need are not receiving the supports they need in many schools.

Mentoring

Both school leaders and educators view Mentoring as an important component of students' long-term success.

- **Evidence of impact:** Quality mentoring can have [powerful positive effects](#) on young people across a range of personal, academic, and professional contexts. [Research](#) indicates that mentored youth are more likely to attend school regularly and less likely to remain in school than their peers. Young people with mentors are also [more likely](#) to report participating in extracurricular activities, taking on leadership roles, and volunteering in their communities. [Learn more about the research behind why mentoring works.](#)
- **Significant unmet demand:** In a [nationally representative survey of public school principals](#) conducted by the RAND Corporation and the Partnership for Student Success, principals reported an increase in student need for mentoring between the 2023-24 and 2024-25 school years, with many students missing out on needed supports.
- **Educator endorsement:** Educators overwhelmingly recognize the value of mentoring, with a [poll](#) finding that 95% of teachers believe every student can benefit from a mentor.

College and Career Advising

College and career advising, or postsecondary transition coaching, is an evidence-based approach that addresses pressing challenges that parents are concerned about:

- **Evidence of impact:** [Research](#) indicates that quality postsecondary transition coaching can have strong positive benefits for students and recent graduates, including “higher GPA, increased participation in early postsecondary opportunities, increased credential attainment, increased retention and persistence, better ability to develop a

TESTED MESSAGES THAT RESONATE

college-going and occupational identity, higher feelings of self-efficacy and motivation, and greater understanding and ability to leverage social capital.” Learn more about the research behind why postsecondary transition coaching works.

- **Confidence gap:** [Polling from 2024](#) indicates that 75% of recent high school graduates feel moderately, slightly, or not at all prepared for their future. Similarly, many [parents are not confident that their child will be well prepared for college admission and success upon graduation](#) from high school (fewer than 50% of parents report being extremely confident in all 50 states). Similarly, many [parents are not confident that their child will be equipped with the knowledge, skills, and competencies to succeed in the workforce](#) (fewer than 50% of parents report that they are extremely confident in all 50 states).

Wraparound/Integrated Supports and Community Schools

Wraparound or integrated student supports – often, but not always, delivered through community school models – provide a range of supports to students and families to meet out-of-school needs to ensure that students can attend school regularly and actively engage and learn:

- **Evidence of impact:** Integrated student supports provided by community schools are associated with several positive student outcomes. Young people receiving these supports—including counseling, medical care, dental services, and transportation assistance—often show [significant improvements](#) in attendance, behavior, social functioning, and academic achievement. Emerging [research](#) also suggests that community school models can have significant long-term economic impacts among participating students, particularly those from low-income families. [Learn more about the research behind why wraparound/integrated supports and community schools work.](#)
- **Bipartisan support:** The community schools approach is supported [across partisan lines](#) and effectively addresses challenges that many stakeholders are concerned about, including chronic absenteeism and lagging academic performance.

TESTED MESSAGES THAT RESONATE

- **Significant unmet demand:** In a [nationally representative survey of school principals](#) conducted by the RAND Corporation and the Partnership for Student Success, principals reported an increase in students' need for wraparound supports from 2023-24 to 2025-26, and that significant proportions of students who need wraparound supports are not receiving them.

AmeriCorps Programs and Service

AmeriCorps has operated for over 30 years and provides funding for many efforts that support K-12 students. AmeriCorps programs engage AmeriCorps members and AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers in a wide range of community supports, including education, youth development, environmental stewardship, veterans' support, food security, and more. A significant portion of AmeriCorps programs (some estimates put it at close to 50%) involves supporting children and youth.

- **Return on Investment:** Research indicates that AmeriCorps produces a strong return on investment. For every taxpayer dollar invested in AmeriCorps, \$17 in benefits is generated through member income, community support, etc.
- **Bipartisan support:** AmeriCorps is supported across the aisle, currently and historically
- **Preparation for the workforce:** Many AmeriCorps programs engage young people and novice professionals, including recent high school and college graduates and career changers. These programs help develop durable skills in AmeriCorps members that employers value across a range of industries, such as teamwork, relationship-building, compromise, conflict resolution, and interpersonal communication. AmeriCorps programs are well-positioned to help prepare novice professionals for in-demand roles in a world where AI is rapidly replacing entry-level jobs.

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