

The mission of the Fulton County School System is to educate students to be responsible, productive citizens. Our vision is to enable all children to learn to their full potential in a safe, nurturing environment.

To that end, it is the goal of the Fulton County School System to help connect schools and the community by every means possible. We value open, honest communication with all stakeholders, and believe in positive working relationships with the news media. We believe that public education is stronger when parents and the community are well-informed and involved in issues affecting Fulton County schools.

### **Relationship with the News Media**

The Fulton County School System prides itself on positive relationships with the news media. These relationships have been formed by understanding that reporters represent the public at large, and are in essence, representatives of our school community. The school system understands that reporters have an important job to do, and as a result, we respect their deadlines and aim to provide complete information in a timely manner. Phone calls and emails, if not immediately answered by a school system representative, will be returned the same day, or at the very latest, within 24 hours.

### **Communications Department**

The Communications Department is to be the first point of contact when the news media needs information. Communications staff members are often close to the story and can provide the necessary details, or can connect a reporter with someone who can share the information. Contacting this department first may save reporters the hassle of unreturned calls or the embarrassment of getting incorrect or incomplete information from a source that may not have all of the facts.

The authorized Public Information Officers for the Fulton County School System are Donna Lowry, Chief Communications Officer, and Carla Murphy, Communications Coordinator. The Communications Department's telephone number is 470-254-6830 and the official office hours are 8 a.m. – 5 p.m. Newsroom editors have their cell numbers and evening/weekend contact information on file.

### **Speaking with the Media**

School system employees who are contacted by the news media should notify their direct supervisor or principal, as well as the Communications Department at 470-254-6830. Although individuals have a First Amendment right to free and protected speech, staff should consult with the Communications Department about whether their comments, as a representative of the school district, are appropriate. In addition, conferring with the Communications Department will help determine if the employee is the correct person to speak on the issue. Staff should never speculate or provide information that has not been verified as fact, or speak beyond their realm of expertise. The Communications Department should be contacted if there is any doubt about an employee's involvement in a news story.

### **Media Reporting on a School Campus**

When a member of the news media visits a school – invited or unannounced – the school will follow the same procedures used for all visitors. The reporter or cameraman must sign in at the front office and wait for an escort. News media – regardless of the story angle – are not permitted to roam a school building or school

grounds without an escort. Failure to follow procedure may result in the reporter being asked to leave the school grounds. In all situations, members of the news media will be treated courteously and professionally.

### **Media Reporting Adjacent to School Grounds**

In certain situations it is not possible for media to be on the school campus due to the disruption it may create or the interference it could cause for emergency responders. In these situations, school staff or a member of the Communications Department will designate an area off of immediate school grounds where media can set up their recording equipment or wait for official information. News media are asked to exercise restraint when deciding to interview children who are off school campus. Media will not be allowed to create disruption or impede traffic flow in any way.

### **FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act)**

News media often ask questions regarding students and their educational records, such as the students' grades, disciplinary record or why a student was disciplined, and/or academic program (such as if the student receives special education services). School system employees cannot comment on this information without parental/legal guardian consent or they will be violating a federal law known as FERPA, or the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act.

FERPA limits the information that a school system can release about a student without parental or legal guardian consent. If a student is 18 years old or older, he or she can consent for himself.

A school system will be in violation of federal law and at risk of losing federal funding if it does not comply with FERPA. This is often why a school system will say it cannot release information about a student. It is not an unwillingness to provide information or appear secretive; it is the school system's legal and ethical responsibility to protect the privacy of students and their education records. Disciplinary tribunals involving students are closed meetings. No media are allowed.

### **Employee Matters**

Likewise, the Fulton County School System has a responsibility to protect the rights of its employees, especially those who may be in the public spotlight. No staff member shall release the home telephone number or address of an employee to the news media, except in situations when the employee approves its release. Harassment of school system staff will not be tolerated.

News media often request the personnel file or ask for comment about an employee who is facing a disciplinary hearing. The school system will follow the Open Records Act and disclose information that is legally releasable. Per Georgia law, confidential employee evaluations are not releasable. Documents used as part of an employee investigation also are not releasable until 10 days after the investigation has concluded or, if necessary, the Board has taken action. School system staff should refer all media requests for personnel information to the Communications Department, which will then work with the Talent/HR Division on applicable release of information.

### **Media Requests for Public Records**

The Communications Department works with the Open Records Office (in the Talent/HR Division) in the release of public records, such as school police reports or documents relating to student records or employee matters. No other school system department is authorized to release these documents to the news media. The Fulton County School System fully complies with the Open Records Law and will assess staff time and copying costs, when necessary, in document retrieval and reproduction.