



### **Statement by Emily Richmond, EWA Public Editor**

Good afternoon. I'd like to share a few examples of education reporters facing access challenges, which come from my conversations with EWA's journalist members:

- In Connecticut, a school district tried to severely limit a reporter's access to teachers. So she started a book club at the local library and invited teachers to join. It's been a runaway success.
- In a southern state, a public university dropped a net over the entire staff, informing them that they must not cooperate with a local paper's higher education reporter. The reporter put in a public records request for the salaries of the communications staff, to find out what they were earning *not* to do their jobs.
- A reporter in the Midwest has been on the education beat for more than five years and has yet to secure an interview with a central office administrator in which the public information officer is not also present. This includes meeting with the superintendent, who set the access policy.

These might seem like extreme examples, but if you share them with education reporters across the country, many would say they've experienced similar circumstances. At the same time, there is no shortage of reporters filing open records requests that are clear and specific, and having those requests filled in a timely fashion. Many reporters would also say they don't have significant problems getting interviews scheduled, visiting schools or talking to teachers. But even basic requests often require multiple phone calls and emails, negotiating terms, and attempts to limit the scope of an interview. All of these things eat up the valuable – and ever-shrinking – amount of time reporters have to get their jobs done.

A frequent complaint from PIOs is that reporters “get the story wrong,” or somehow don't fully convey the nuances of a complex situation. That's a reasonable concern and the best way to address it is to give reporters access to the individuals in a position to explain those complexities and provide the relevant context.

I find it interesting that three-quarters of the journalists who took part in the EWA-SPJ survey said they have positive relationships with the public information officers at their local school districts. This is further evidence that both sides likely view

each other as approaching their work with the best of intentions. But it's not necessarily a good thing if reporters believe that it is part of a PIO's job description to throw up roadblocks for reporters. Rather, education reporters need to realize that the default position is "open," not "closed." PIOs should be gatekeepers, not prison guards.

So why does this matter? As a recent survey of all EWA members shows, reporters and public information officers are on the same page about what they believe is in too-short supply: high-quality, in-depth reporting on education issues. In fact, 58 percent of journalist members listed a lack of time and resources for deep dives as their No. 1 career challenge. At the same time, 42 percent of EWA's non-journalist members say a lack of coverage and in-depth coverage of education also represented their biggest career challenge. To be sure, it would be difficult to find a time in recent history when the nation's public education system was in greater flux, or when the accountability that comes with thoughtful scrutiny by the media mattered more. If we truly want more and better education coverage, eliminating unnecessary and unreasonable limits to access of information and individuals would be an encouraging step in the right direction.