
Mediated Access

Education Writers'
Perceptions of Public
Information Officers'
Media Control Efforts

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& Megan Roy

SUMMARY

A survey of journalists who cover education found that information flow in the United States is highly regulated by public information officers, to the point where most reporters considered the control to be a form of censorship and an impediment to providing information to the public. According to a survey of 190 reporters who cover K-12, higher education and state and federal departments of education, conducted by the Education Writers Association in October and November 2013, journalists indicated that public information officers often require pre-approval for interviews, decide who reporters get to interview and often monitor interviews. Sometimes they will prohibit interviews altogether. Education writers overwhelmingly agreed with the statement that “the public was not getting all the information it needs because of barriers agencies are imposing on journalists’ reporting practices.”

STUDY SAMPLE

The survey was conducted online Oct. 21, 2013, through Nov. 11, 2013. The 1,591 journalist members of the Education Writers Association were e-mailed an initial message and four follow-up messages over the course of three weeks to recruit them to take the survey. In all, 190 respondents completed the survey. Ninety-one percent (n=171) were full-time journalists, six were part-time and ten were freelancers. The largest number worked for mid-sized daily newspapers (26.1%, n=49) and the next largest worked for small newspapers (22.9%, n=44), large newspapers (19.7%, n=37) and online only outlets (12.2%, n=26). The rest worked for weeklies, magazines, wire services or radio. There were no television respondents.

A third of the journalists said their beat was K-12 (30.1%, n=56), while 38 said they covered K-12 plus higher education (20.4%), and 53 said they covered all education entities (28.5%). A smaller number (n=24) said they covered higher education only (12.9%) and 15 said they covered K-12 plus state and federal education agencies (8.1%). Almost half of the respondents had between three and 10 years experience as a reporter (n=74, 43.8%), and more than a quarter had more than 20 years experience as a professional journalist (n=47, 27.8%). The same number had 11 to 20 years experience as had less than three years experience (n=24, 14.2%). Three-quarters of the respondents were women (75.1%, n=127, male n=49, 24.9%). Respondents ranged in age from 21 to 79, with a mean age of 38.0 and a median age of 36.

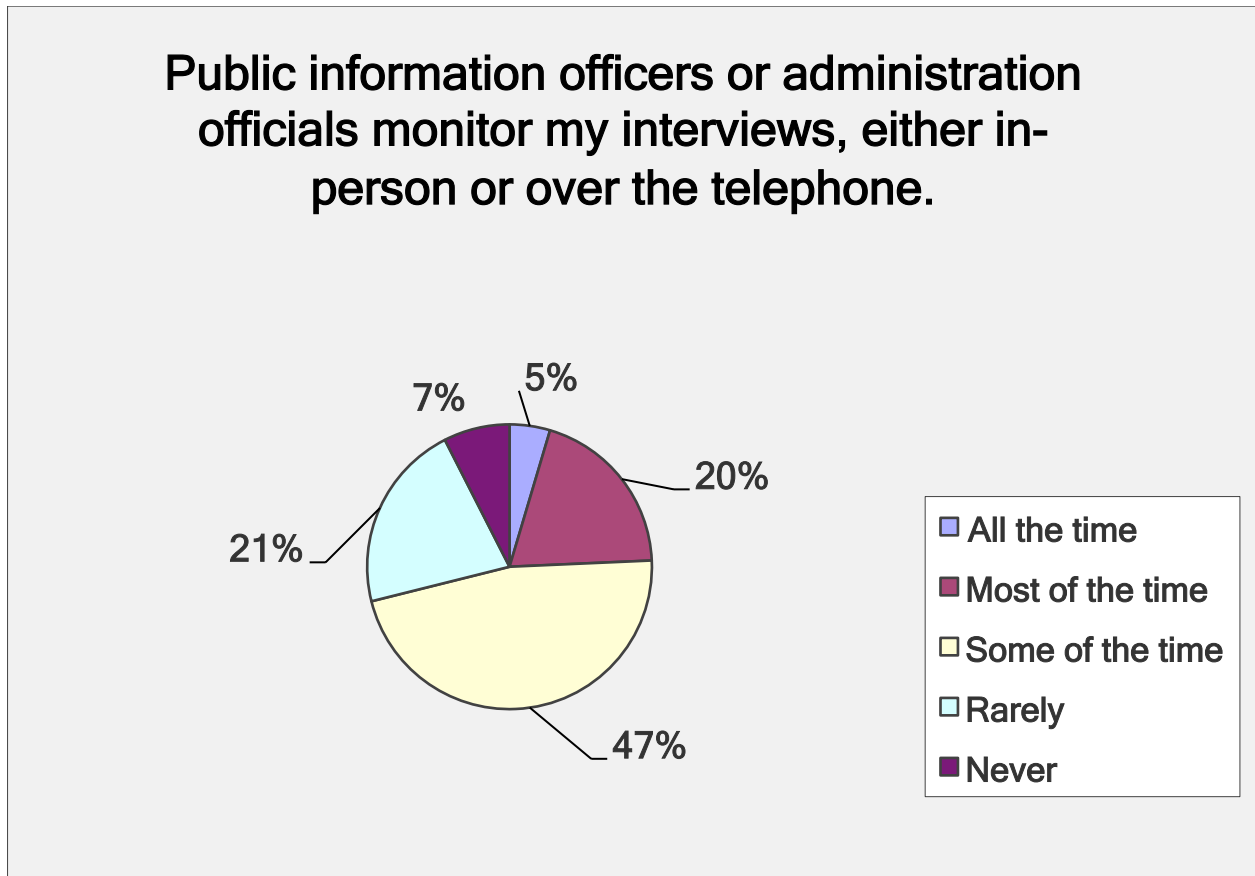
The margin of error of the study is plus or minus 6.7 percent.

SUMMARY FINDINGS

The surveyed journalists overwhelmingly reported barriers to getting information because of public information officers, or sometimes school administrators, controlling interviews. In particular:

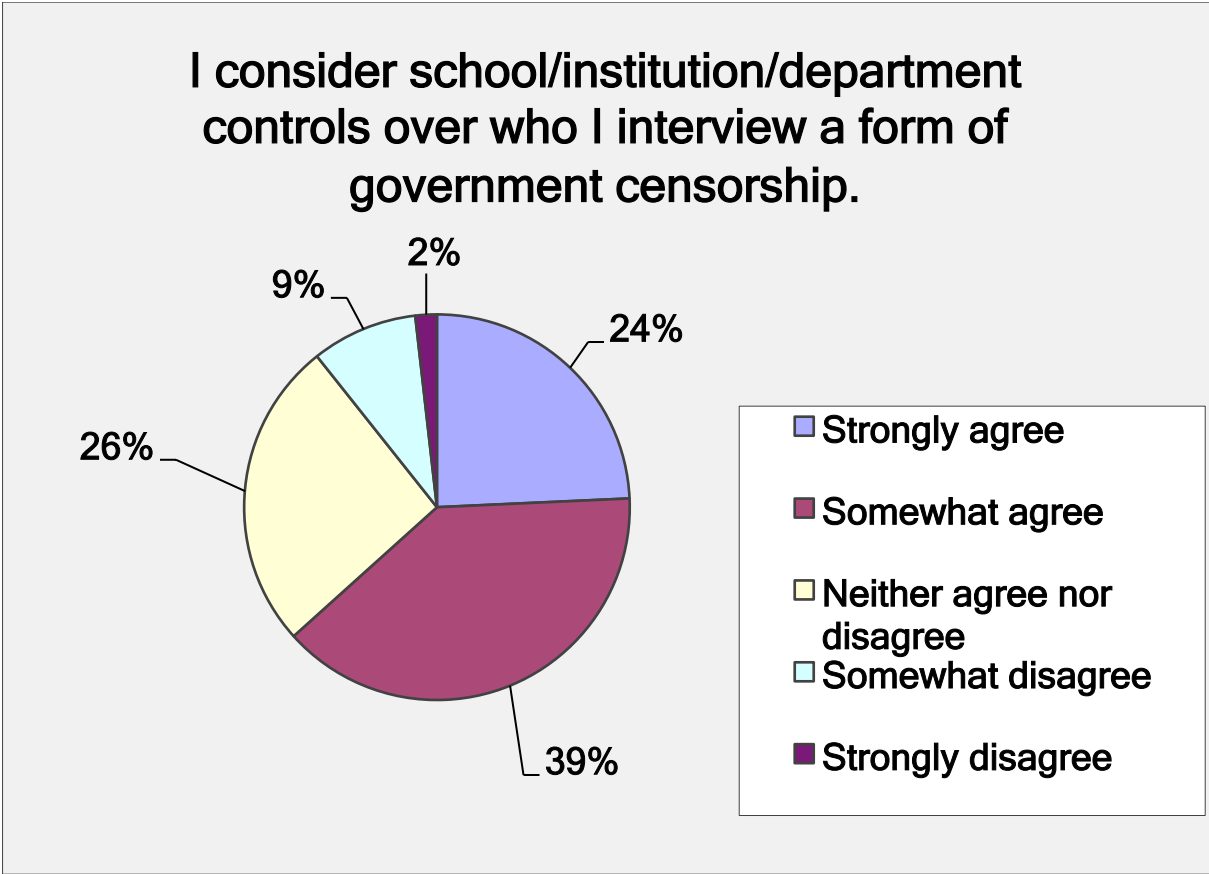
- **Prohibition:** Although most say it rarely or never happens, about a quarter of the education writers say they have been outright prohibited from interviewing school, department and institution employees at least some of the time (25.1%, n=44). Five reporters said it happened all the time (2.9%) and eight said it happened most of the time (4.6%).
 - Usually, according to 38 reporters, the PIO, principal or superintendent will intervene to stop them from interviewing a particular person.
 - Twenty reporters said some employees, particularly teachers, are just prohibited from talking to them.
 - Twenty-three reporters said what happens is people they need to talk to are suddenly “unavailable” for interviews.
- **Response:** Most of the time PIOs respond quickly to requests for interviews (48.1%, n=88), although more than a third said a quick response happened only some of the time (35.5%, n=65).
 - Sometimes it takes multiple requests to get a useful response from the public information office to requests for information and interviews (42.3%, n=74); for 39 reporters multiple requests are the norm (most of the time 22.3%) but multiple requests are required only rarely for 45 reporters (25.7%).
 - It's rare that a PIO would ignore a request until after deadline for 42.6 percent (n=78), while 31.7 percent says they get ignored some of the time (n=58) and 10.4 percent says it happens all the time (n=19).
- **Routing:** Three-quarters of reporters say their requests for interviews are forwarded to public information officers for selective routing to whomever the PIOs want (15.1%, n=26 all the time, 22.1%, n=38 most of the time and 39.5%, n=68 some of the time).

- **Monitoring:** Almost half said their interviews are monitored in person or over the telephone at least some of the time (46.8%, n=81). Eight (4.6%) said this happens all of the time and one-fifth (19.7%, n=34) said it happens most of the time.



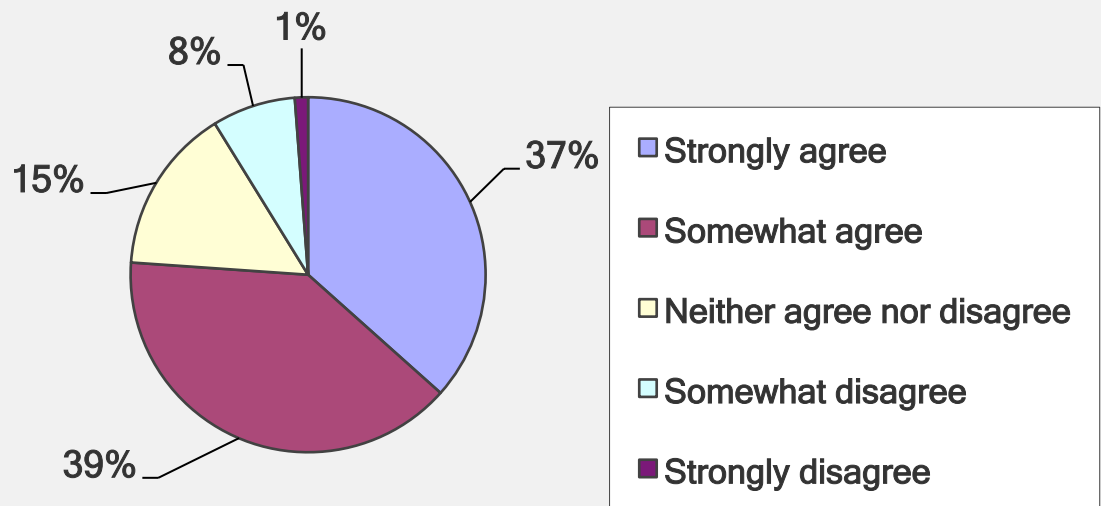
- **Avoidance:** More than half of the reporters said that they tried to circumvent the public affairs office at least some of the time (56.9%, n=99). Twenty-nine reporters (16.7%) said they avoided the public affairs officers altogether most of the time, going straight to the employees without the PIO consent, but only eight reporters (4.6%) said they did that all the time. On the other hand, 31 reporters said they rarely circumvented the public information office (17.8%) and seven reporters said they never did (4.0%).
- **Working Relationship:** Despite the problems, three-fourths of the reporters said they had a positive working relationship with the PIOs on their beat (30% strongly agree, n=51, 48.8% somewhat agree, n=83).

- **Censorship:** Six out of 10 reporters agreed with the statement: “I consider school/institution/department controls over who I interview a form of government censorship” (24.3% n=41 strongly agree, 39.1%, n=66 somewhat agree). Forty-four reporters (26.0%) neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement and the rest disagreed (8.9%, n=15 somewhat disagree, 1.8% n=3 strongly disagree).



- **Public hurt:** About 76 percent of the journalists agreed with the statement that “The public is not getting the information it needs because of barriers schools, institutions or departments are imposing on journalists’ reporting practices” (36.6% n=63 strongly agree, 39.5% n=68 somewhat agree). Twenty-six neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement (15.1%), while 15 disagreed with the statement (7.6% n=13 somewhat disagreed, .1.2%, n=2 strongly disagreed).

The public is not getting all the information it needs because of barriers schools, institutions or departments are imposing on journalists' reporting practices.



- **Public records:** Two-thirds of the education writers reported that, the most recent time they asked for a public record, the public records custodian they dealt with responded to the record request within the required timeframe under their state's law (66.3%, n=110). Only 28 said they missed the deadline (16.9%) and seven said they didn't respond at all (4.2%). Twenty-one said the custodians turned over records immediately (12.7%).
 - Of those whose request was fulfilled, only two-thirds got the information they had requested (67.9%, n=108). Fourteen didn't get the correct information (8.8%) and the rest "sort of" got the correct information (23.3%, n=37).
 - Of those who "sort of" got the right information, half said the information that was provided was vague or incomplete, a third said the response was so delayed it was useless and the rest said that privacy concerns (redacting) had rendered the records useless.
 - For example, one respondent said, "I request paper records and get a database. Information is routinely deleted from databases citing FOIA exemptions --- then

subsequent requests come back with that information included. They create lots of databases which is not only above and beyond the law, it's time consuming and less informative. Just about all records requests come back so late they're no longer timely or useful. And I'm 97 percent sure all requests get screened by PIO so ones really harmful to district take the longest.”

- Seventy percent of the time, the PIOs or the records custodian answered questions the reporters had about the public records or the information the reporters were seeking (70.4%, n=112). Twenty respondents said they refused to answer questions (12.6%) and 27 respondents (17%) said they “sort of” answered questions. Those who said “sort of” said the custodian gave vague answers, ignored their requests for information, took too much time to get information or tried to be helpful to a certain extent.
- **FERPA:** When a PIO or a records custodian cited FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) in denying a records request or part of a records request or just a request for information, most of the time (23.4%, n=36) or at least some of the time (29.9%, n=46) they cited FERPA accurately. Eight reporters said they never cited FERPA accurately (5.2%) while 44 percent said they didn't cite FERPA at all (28.6%).
- **Open-ended comments:** Of those respondents who chose to make open-ended comments, the largest number (39.5%, n=34) indicated they thought public information officers try to deter, obstruct or manipulate a story, while 32 reporters (37.2%) said they have a variety of experiences and relationships with the PIOs they deal with. Comments included:
 - “I deal with PIOs in lots of school districts, the state department of education, various education membership associations, and they vary wildly in their interest and ability to help me get what I need. Some are great and very time sensitive. Others basically wait me out until I have no more time. The worst one is probably at the state department of education.”
 - “Going through public information officers, ironically, is not a good way to get an interview. All they do is delay things and make your job harder. I only use them when it is required and then I try to figure out how to circumvent them. They are typically a disruption rather than an aid.”
 - ” It's my job to get ‘regular’ people to talk to me. Often, this takes a long time with educators and PIOs. I have found they are more open when they believe you will treat them fairly, and you make it a point to learn about them. This allows me

to naturally go around the PIO, rather than a bull in a china shop approach, which rarely works in K12 education reporting.”

- “I think it is especially difficult in small towns to circumnavigate PIOs and get staff-level people to speak on the record, because gossip spreads quickly and, especially in this funding climate in education and the economy in general, people are worried they'll be found out as a source and lose their job.”

SURVEY QUESTIONS

I am required to obtain approval from the public information office before interviewing employees.

All the time	34	18.7%
Most of the time	67	36.8%
Some of the time	61	33.5%
Rarely	14	7.7%
Never	6	3.3%

The PIO will ignore my request for an interview until after my deadline has passed.

All the time	1	0.5%
Most of the time	19	10.4%
Some of the time	58	31.7%
Rarely	78	42.6%
Never	27	14.8%

Public information officers quickly respond to my requests for information and interviews.

All the time	8	4.4%
Most of the time	88	48.1%
Some of the time	65	35.5%
Rarely	20	10.9%
Never	2	1.1%

It takes multiple requests to get a useful response from the public information office to my request for information and interviews.

All the time	14	8.0%
Most of the time	39	22.3%
Some of the time	74	42.3%
Rarely	45	25.7%
Never	3	1.7%

I have been prohibited by the PIO from interviewing school, department or institution employees.

All the time	5	2.9%
Most of the time	8	4.6%
Some of the time	44	25.1%
Rarely	68	38.9%
Never	50	28.6%

I am only allowed to interview a student who has given the school written permission from the student's parents to talk to the media.

All the time	28	16.1%
Most of the time	41	23.6%
Some of the time	32	18.4%
Rarely	19	10.9%
Never	32	18.4%
Does not apply	22	12.6%

My requests for interviews with specific institution/department employees are forwarded to public information officers for selective routing to whomever they want.

All the time	26	15.1%
Most of the time	38	22.1%
Some of the time	68	39.5%
Rarely	31	18.0%
Never	9	5.2%

I avoid the public information office altogether, circumventing it and going straight to school/institution/department employees without the PIO's consent.

All the time	8	4.6%
Most of the time	29	16.7%
Some of the time	99	56.9%
Rarely	31	17.8%
Never	7	4.0%

I have a positive working relationship with public information officers.

Strongly agree	51	30.0%
Somewhat agree	83	48.8%
Neither agree nor disagree	18	10.6%
Somewhat disagree	12	7.1%
Strongly disagree	6	3.5%

I consider school/institution/department controls over who I interview a form of government censorship.

Strongly agree	41	24.3%
Somewhat agree	66	39.1%
Neither agree nor disagree	44	26.0%
Somewhat disagree	15	8.9%
Strongly disagree	3	1.8%

The public is not getting all the information it needs because of barriers schools, institutions or departments are imposing on journalists' reporting practices.

Strongly agree	63	36.6%
Somewhat agree	68	39.5%
Neither agree or disagree	26	15.1%
Somewhat disagree	13	7.6%
Strongly disagree	2	1.2%

How long did it take the PIO or other designated custodian of records to respond for a request for a public record?

Immediately	21	12.7%
Within the required time frame under my state's law	110	66.3%
Eventually, but after the deadline under my state's law	28	16.9%
Didn't respond at all	7	4.2%

If the request was fulfilled, did they provide you with the information you asked for?

Yes	108	67.9%
No	14	8.8%
Sort of*	37	23.3%

Did the PIO or custodian answer questions you had about the public records or the information you were seeking?

Yes	112	70.4%
No	20	12.6%
Sort of*	27	17.0%

When the PIO or the custodian cites FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) in denying a records request or part of a records request or just a request for information, do they cite the law accurately?

All the time	5	3.2%
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Most of the time	36	23.4%
Some of the time	46	29.9%
Rarely	15	9.7%
They never cite FERPA accurately	8	5.2%
They don't cite FERPA at all	44	28.6%

***See Appendix**

RESEARCHERS

The survey was conducted by Dr. Carolyn S. Carlson, an assistant professor of communication at Kennesaw State University in Kennesaw, Ga., on behalf of the Society of Professional Journalists Freedom of Information Committee, of which she is a member. Dr. Carlson is a former national president of the Society of Professional Journalists.

She was assisted in the project by Megan Roy, a graduate research assistant at Kennesaw State University and a student in the Masters of Arts in Integrated Global Communication program.

For further information, contact Dr. Carlson at ccarls10@kennesaw.edu.

SPONSORS

As the professional organization of members of the media who cover education at all levels, the Education Writers Association has worked for more than 65 years to help journalists get the story right. The mission of the EWA is to increase the quality and quantity of education coverage to create a better-informed society.

The Society of Professional Journalists comprises 8,000 members nationwide. Founded in 1909 as Sigma Delta Chi, the Society of Professional Journalists promotes the free flow of information vital to a well-informed citizenry; works to inspire and educate the next generation of journalists; and protects First Amendment guarantees of freedom of speech and press.

APPENDIX: OPEN-ENDED RESPONSES

Thinking of the last time you were prohibited from interviewing, please explain the reason you were given for the prohibition, if any.
There is a long-standing policy that teachers do not talk to the media.
That person didn't want to talk to the media/wasn't the right person to talk to.
It was a passive aggressive prohibition. I asked twice via e-mail to talk to someone at the state department of education, and she first sent me an FAQ on the subject (testing) and then sent me a suggestion to talk to a membership organization for school superintendents. Specific follow-up questions were met with one-sentence answers that basically were meant to stonewall me.
The person was an "unauthorized" representative of the department.
The Common Application refused my contact with any of their Board Members
This has mainly happened in school safety matters, after a lock down, with the district speaking with "one voice."
The last time I was prohibited from an interview was at the local historically black college, which is private. The vice president did not want me to attend a public meeting after writing stories about the college's misuse of funds.
The person I wanted to interview was deemed to not have the correct knowledge of the topic at hand.
District employees say they are prohibited from speaking to media.
Personnel issues.
Usually, I am told that the person won't be useful to me.
Wouldn't answer calls.
Assertion that the superintendent was "unavailable."
Policy that questions be submitted in writing and responded to by email rather than an actual interview.
The district was shifting teachers based on actual enrollment versus projections. Reason: information hadn't been shared with parents and teachers yet.
Too busy.
The PIO preferred to facilitate the interview, and thus control the information shared, himself.
They didn't have time.
The superintendent cited FERPA, even though FERPA didn't apply, and he finally conceded it didn't apply.
One school board I cover has a rule that only the chairperson can give press interviews. The chairman says this policy is recommended by the state school boards association and is supposed to ensure a consistent message is going out to the public. Although this is the policy, it doesn't prohibit me from speaking to other board members, and several are willing to speak with me on the record depending on the issue.
The school district didn't like the controversial story that I was writing, but they cited FERPA regulations as the reason why.
Often cites privacy laws, or schedule conflicts. Also, doesn't approve of talking to students about topics ranging from new school policies to school security.
Hasn't happened with the district I cover most often - has happened with other educational agencies with instructors who have English as a second language.

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The interview subject didn't want to talk about the topic.
I don't like the word "prohibited," because it doesn't seem to be what happens in most cases. If it's a high-level person (president/provost), I'm at the mercy of the PIO to arrange that interview. If the PIO says the president declines, then the interview has been blocked -- but that is probably a decision made by the president, not the PIO.
"[State University] policy requires that all inquiries from the media go through the Office of Communications."
School district refused to provide name or contact info of PTA head for "privacy" reasons. Unbelievable.
[Department] refused to comment on the record about college prices. Unbelievable.
Teachers don't feel comfortable with the press. It's for their own good.
I was not allowed to interview a school board member because policy says the president is the spokesperson.
The prohibition is rarely explicit. Usually, when the PIO (or, more likely the superintendent) doesn't want me to interview someone, they just don't make that person available. There are, of course, instances in which an employee is in trouble where the district will flatly say they will not be made available.
They don't give a reason — they just don't provide any access to people who are otherwise inaccessible.
Lack of communication by me and/or source; lack of diplomacy hurts us both; not prejudgment
Pending internal investigation of employee who was placed on paid administrative leave.
The last time I was prohibited from interviewing someone was not in this current job
It is said only PIO can answer media questions some times.
A severance agreement between the outgoing superintendent and school board prohibited any parties involved from speaking about the superintendent's "retirement" except for the school board president, who refused to answer any of my questions.
They said they wanted the school to be focused on learning, rather than whether the building was going to close.
Often the [Department] grants minimal access to career staffers who are best able to answer detailed/nuanced programmatic questions about federal education law. Usually, requests are ignored unless the issue is a high priority for the Administration. Nearly always information is given "on background" and without attaching the name of an actual [Department] staffer to the information.
PIO wanted interview requests to be cleared by her first.
"It would be too disruptive." "They are not authorized to speak for the institution." "(Select administrators) will answer all your questions."
The PIO considered my request a "personnel issue" and refused to let me speak with the superintendent of a local school district.
Federal student privacy laws, a college president because he simply didn't want to talk to me
The PIOs feel their statements are adequate; they say that employees are uncomfortable talking to reporters.
Often, the department blames the employee and says they didn't want to be interviewed. But I know that sometimes that's not true. The employee (principal, usually) would have been willing to participate if they had gotten approval.
Privacy rights
We are prohibited from interviewing any principals or going into schools. However, many principals and teachers talk to us, but we often must agree not to identify them. The PIO says that this rule (which is new under the current administration) is to prevent principals from being bothered by journalists.
District superintendent didn't want to answer questions about compensation.

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Personnel matter.
The last time I was prohibited from interviewing was for a story about teachers preparing for the start of the school year before their official start date. I requested to interview a specific teacher and was told "no" because the principal had "concerns." The school system PIO declined to specify what the concerns were.
Didn't want employees talking to media.
No school employees were willing to be interviewed. In another case, districts have issued instructions that only the superintendent or PIO could speak to the media.
Told they didn't want to be interviewed.
No reason, or principal didn't want to talk to you. Principal prefers that reporters not be in the school at this time.
I was working on a story about parent volunteers alleging the district didn't enforce security policies consistently and correctly across schools. The district did not want me to speak with district employees for the story. I was told that "all comments would be handled by the PIO office."
"They are too busy;" less common than a prohibition is for a request for an interview to be ignored. Most common of all, however, is to be prohibited from interviewing school district employees or students unless a "minder" from the PIO is present or on the phone with us.
Until about 8 years ago, that was routine here. Now principals have a lot of autonomy and can decide whether or not to talk with me, so I don't go through the PIO for that at all. But no one at department headquarters can speak without going through the PIO, and the PIO routinely blocks requests, answering all questions with a canned email statement that varies little, regardless of the question.
More that access to high-ranking officials wasn't granted than a straight "prohibition." Often access is denied without reason; sometimes schedule or district preference is cited.
PIO said the committee who created a new discipline process wasn't prepared to speak yet, even though new process was launching in two days.
They didn't want me to cover a particular class (a hospice-led class) at a school district. Didn't want me to violate privacy.
Personnel issue subject to executive session. My co-worker (also an education reporter) was barred from attending a school closure discussion involving district officials and parents.
Sometimes folks are conveniently not available, or I'm told the person did not consent to be interviewed, but only campus supervisors have ever "prohibited" my interviewing anyone by ordering me off campus.
I was told I needed to allow the person to call me back after the [Department] contacted them. So, I wasn't really prohibited from interviewing, just from contacting directly. However, this slows down the process and sometimes results in no interview if there's a quick deadline.
FERPA; covering a politically sensitive topic and a topic related to gang activity in the community
The PIO didn't think the superintendent should be bothered to answer my questions.
I am not prohibited from interviewing. But I must get prior OK from the PIO, submit questions in writing, let the PIO sit in. This introduces limits and delays on the free flow of information. (This does not happen all the time at every district, just most often)
If I am prohibited from interviewing someone, it's usually because the PIO has someone else in mind that knows the talking points.
They didn't want to upset parents.
It wasn't in the district's best interest was one. District claimed other times the employees didn't want to be disrupted.
That standard procedure is that all requests to interview public school faculty, administration or staff must first

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be approved by the PR person. Some principals and teachers would talk to us without permission, after checking that their contracts do not prohibit talking to press nor do they stipulate that they must first be cleared to talk with press.
I was told only the superintendent and his 2 assistants could speak for the district. I was told not even principals could comment.
Short notice/not able to meet my deadline.
I wasn't given one -- simply got bounced to the PIO. The story was on a senior prank that resulted in police action.
Covered under the state's privacy laws dealing with students or employees
I have never been denied an interview from anyone in the district.
Department didn't want to respond to questions
Usually because of very sensitive or personnel matters, such as a teacher being arrested for sexual relations with a student. The principal just won't take calls.
No reason; PIO took my questions and asked staff, and then gave answers to me.
It is more a lack of access, or a lack of a prompt response, that has the effect of a prohibition without being a prohibition.
Simply didn't connect me with a person until deadline had already passed.
They do not want to disrupt learning.
I was told the employee did not wish to participate.
I was writing about budget cuts and teacher layoffs and the district was reluctant to allow me to interview teachers.
Individual was unavailable because they were out of town.
Division claimed the person wasn't the "best" or "right" person and suggested an alternative.
They will say that I can talk to them on background. Once, they did not allow a principal to speak to me at all
The person's too busy to talk.
Interview candidate was too busy
K-12 superintendents simply say they speak for the district, and are authorized to carry the district's desired message, while other employees do not and are not.
Often, the PIO speaks for specific employees. That's not a strict prohibition, but it acts as such.
This rarely happens to me, but if it's a very controversial situation, the school employees usually refer me to the superintendent.
They did not want to participate in the story.
Principal involved in a student abuse lawsuit (not the perpetrator) wanted to talk to me. District didn't want him to.
They say that they are not talking to the media.

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<p>If you have ever been banned altogether from interviewing employees at a particular school, office or department, please explain the circumstances that led to the banning and what you were able to do about it.</p>
<p>I gave up and had to work without it</p>
<p>I was banned from interviewing employees after writing a series of stories about a college misusing federal money. I was not able to do anything about it, because it is a private school.</p>
<p>I still attempting to ask questions of employees and sometimes found one willing to talk</p>
<p>A story that the president perceived as unfavorable. He eventually got over it.</p>
<p>Not banned, but just department policy that questions be submitted and answered in writing.</p>
<p>We live in a small enough town that I'm in enough community meetings with senior elementary and high school administrators. If I have difficulty getting through or getting a response, they're almost always helpful.</p>
<p>[Department] prohibits any employee from directly talking to the media without express consent from one of several overworked, largely incompetent PIOs.</p>
<p>A student was shot to death, and the principal told me I could not talk to anyone but him.</p>
<p>Hasn't happened that blatantly - more likely to find (or suspect) people in an agency have been told not to speak with me.</p>
<p>The last time this happened it was because they didn't like something I had written. It gradually got better over time.</p>
<p>I was banned from speaking to the head of University Police after I had exposed that the previous chief was a convicted felon. I wanted to interview the new chief about turmoil in the department (crime rates had skyrocketed), but I was told I am not permitted to interview any employee of the police department.</p>
<p>I had to give up most time.</p>
<p>I used a public information request to get a copy of said severance agreement to explain to readers why the former superintendent refused to speak with me. That was the best I could come up with at the time.</p>
<p>They didn't want me in the school during the school day talking to employees, so I tried to catch them as they walked out of the school.</p>
<p>I was writing about upheaval in a continuation school, involving violence on campus, attacks and threats against teachers and chaotic classrooms.</p>
<p>Employees at [University] are prohibited from talking to the media without approval from the PR department. So, I can call them, but they won't talk if they can't get such approval.</p>
<p>PIOs said employees of a particular department or school are uncomfortable speaking with reporters. We had to note as much in the story.</p>
<p>Bigger issue is employees being warned not to speak to the press, period.</p>
<p>There have been times when I have asked to get into a particular school, but been told that the principal doesn't want me in there. In at least two situations, I talked to the principal who said that the communications' office never even approached them with a request for the interview. When confronting the communications' office about this, I was eventually allowed to talk to the principals. [City], where I worked, just closed 47 schools. Media were banned from going into schools on the closing list. However, many principals let us in anyway and just let us interview people other than them. Also, often we have to tell the story by talking to parents, teachers</p>

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and community organizations because it is so difficult getting into schools.
It was at a job fair for prospective employees from a district that was being closed down and merged with another district. They said that it was a "sensitive time."
I was once told that no reporters are allowed in classrooms of a major city by the chief PIO. I said that was absurd and not true. I believe they were trying to dissuade me from continuing a series on one school. I just let some time pass and worked with a different, more junior PIO and was let back in under tightly controlled circumstances.
I covered K-12 education for 20 years until 2009, and I often had that experience. I familiarized myself with the state laws on the subject, kept a copy of the law in my purse, and had to use it frequently. Only once did I have to use that tactic at a community college in 2012. The usual standoff occurred, and I was able to sit in on the class I was looking for.
Banned from speaking directly with [Department] employees. Forced to publish stories with less than complete information. Able to obtain some information post-deadline via public records laws.
Plenty of times they control who I get to talk to. But sometimes I can work around it.
If I do run into a roadblock, I usually either try to find someone else to interview, or just write that the agency refused to comment.
The PIO barred me from a press event in May on high school graduation rates because I don't have a police press pass. They stonewalled my request until a few minutes before the conference and then denied it. I have covered similar events previously but Bloomberg has become increasingly thin skinned as his term winds down.
After a married high school teacher ran off with a student, the school was mobbed by national media. Employees were told not to talk to anyone with the press, including me. I spoke with the couple, the affected families around the couple and got district/principal statements for following stories. For one on ethics, I spoke with teachers' union representatives, school board members and state/national experts. Plenty of campus employees e-mailed me anonymously. My most successful tact was to stay pleasant and put requests in terms of what getting their story out there could do for them.
After a student was killed in a car accident, the principal told our photographer and me to leave the campus, and staff members said they feared the principal wouldn't want them to talk to me, so they didn't. I interviewed a parent and his child instead and quoted the principal. I also wrote about what happened on my blog.
The school district thought we were too negative and told school employees not to talk to us. We just waited it out and talked to employees without identifying them.
Not forever
But in daily journalism, even a delay can have that effect
I am banned from talking to employees directly without the express consent of the central district office for any and all stories.
During the massive school closing process, I was told I would not get into particular schools. But it was easy enough to wait outside on the sidewalk to get stakeholders if not the principal.
We uncovered and reported that the principal of a public high school planned to hire his wife to work at the school he leads in a position she was not qualified for; also said may hire other family members (daughter and/or step-daughter mentioned).
Not "banned," but I have been ignored and calls have gone unreturned
None. I can always wait outside a school and talk to whomever.
There is a school that I have been trying to get into for more than a year without success. I just keep asking. I

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haven't succeeded yet.
Haven't been banned. Just told I cannot contact administrative directly.
No, although it frequently takes longer than I expect.
No official "ban," but the PIOs have made it very difficult, almost impossible, to cover a few low-performing schools. They always scheduled interviews or site visits at other schools. When I need access to a low-performing school for a specific story, they wait until the last minute to schedule everything, sometimes preventing me from being able to do the story.
Yes - with a large education organization due primarily to the officer's over protection - basically could not do anything about it
Most of the K-12 districts have a standing policy that the superintendents are the spokesperson for the district. However, I have several friendly sources in the teaching staffs and elsewhere that are willing to speak to me directly, despite that policy. When they ask to speak off-the-record, they often have documents they can provide which can be sourced in my story.
I was able to call the source directly, who was the president of the university, and they reconsidered and did the interview.
Sometimes when I contact the responsible persons they refuse to talk with me.
Yes, several schools that were involved in a high tech experiment and withdrew from using the technology did not want to talk to me. I pressed a few times and let it drop.

Public information officers or administration officials monitor my interviews, either in-person or over the telephone. Please give any examples.
During elections, campaign managers have listened in.
I interviewed a hospital official about a walk-to-school program she was helping with and the PIO was there with her on speakerphone. At points during the interview there were huge pauses after my questions and I could tell they were either writing notes to each other or mouthing suggestions. I ended up needing to ask this hospital official follow up questions and she refused to set up a phone call with me because the PIO wasn't available the day of my deadline.
I know with [District] officials, they often listen in on interviews and sometime interject.
They sit in on phone interviews or in person interviews. It's common.
Almost 100 percent of the time, the PIO at the [Department] will sit in on the interviews or is on a phone call with the officials. Whenever I go directly to a person at the department it works for a while and then I am told to contact the PIO.
One of our universities always has a PIO in the room during interviews, at the largest school district the PIOs will sit on some interviews with district officials
I recall only one instance, months ago, where I was interviewing the superintendent at the district's headquarters and the superintendent allowed the PIO to remain in the room.
Occasionally they'll be part of the crowd when I'm on speaker phone, occasionally sitting in the room and not participating
I have more access at institutions where I am well known, less at others.
PIOs who sit in on calls to superintendents. State-level PIOs who only let you talk to officials via the phone, or route emailed responses from their offices instead of directly from the source.

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<p>Sometimes I sense the PIO is present during an interview to intimidate the employee into saying the "right" thing vs. trying to interfere or intervene with my questions.</p>
<p>Recently a child here killed himself, and I needed to interview school employees about bullying allegations. I was not allowed to interview the employees without their supervisors in the room.</p>
<p>If I have managed to set up an interview without permission from PIO, they will show up in the middle of the interview to monitor if they learn about it.</p>
<p>Occasionally I'll be put on speaker phone if I'm doing a telephone interview and occasionally a PIO will be in the same room; ditto if I'm interviewing a student; they seldom say anything, though</p>
<p>When speaking with employees of the state department of education the PIO often sits in on the interview and sometimes on a conference call - however, he often sets up the interviews.</p>
<p>I have had PIOs sit in on interviews with assistant superintendent-level staffers a number of times. It is rarely done with superintendents or principals, but at that in-between level.</p>
<p>About one-quarter of the time, a PIO will sit in on an interview. A little less frequently, they'll set up a conference call and listen in on the interview. Obviously, I hate this.</p>
<p>On occasion, a PIO will be in the room on speakerphone with a college president. They are ostensibly there to "help" if questions arise that need attention later. I have my doubts about that, but most of them do not interfere with the interview. And if they do I usually say, "I think the president can and should speak for himself/herself."</p>
<p>Most of the time the PIO only allows me to send questions to her and she will gather (incomplete) answers. But on the rare occasion I am allowed an in-person interview, she must always sit in. The most recent case was a time when I was writing about a new work-study program and speaking with students and administrators on a panel. She needed to take a phone call and asked that we stop speaking until she returned.</p>
<p>Some local district PIOs will "shadow" me on visits to schools and insist on sitting in on interviews. Often the PIO for the state department of education will do conference call interviews with key staff, so she can "understand what is going on."</p>
<p>I was banned from interviewing school employees at a given school without the school PIO watching. When I protested the arrangement and asked his reasons on video, the PIO blew up and grabbed my camera and ordered me to stop filming. He lost his job over the episode.</p>
<p>When this happens, the PIO will either stand next to me while interviewing someone in person or sit in on a speaker phone if it's conducted that way.</p>
<p>I interviewed the new president of the [school], and the PIO had to be in the room, and recorded the entire interview.</p>
<p>I'm not sure if they are monitoring my phone interviews, but it is possible.</p>
<p>When I want to speak to the district official in charge of charter schools about enrollment, or a school's closing, the PIO sits on the line when we talk. Same thing with the head of Human Resources, etc. Almost anytime I have to go through the PIO to get an interview, he monitors the phone call. He's not terribly obtrusive, and usually only has one or two things to say, so I don't find it problematic. More problematic is the district's policy that inquiries I make to department employees are almost always then rerouted to the PIO office or media relations/public information office, which slows down my ability to get information.</p>
<p>Feds in east room of White House as I observe ceremony for retarded girl; not obtrusive</p>
<p>Sometimes when I interview the superintendent, the district's PIO is in the room taking notes like I am</p>
<p>Whenever I interview the superintendent of the biggest school district I cover, the PIO is there. Sometimes he listens to my phone or in-person interviews with principals as well. With most other administrators, teachers or</p>

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<p>students, he leaves me be. However, I will say, he has never interfered or tried to change my interviewees' answers, or directed them in any way (at least while I was present. I'm sure he gave them some prompting beforehand). Mostly he just takes notes and will sometimes provide supplementary information.</p>
<p>Honestly, the worst schools to deal with are the small surrounding school districts with no PIO. They obviously have no training in dealing with the media, and are immediately defensive when I introduce myself as a reporter. Recently, an administrative assistant refused to put me through to the superintendent at all, even though I just wanted to ask him to clarify things he wrote in a press release. I had to intercept him at a school board meeting, where I found him to be a reasonable, pleasant person, and we set up an interview for the following morning.</p>
<p>During event coverage, PIOs will occasionally join the conversation. And once, I had a PIO sit in on a conversation I was having with students about enrollment numbers.</p>
<p>In the rare cases where phone interviews are granted, a PIO is always on the line to limit the time and sometimes divert follow-up questions.</p>
<p>In some of the institutions I cover, PIOs will stay on the line and chime in on occasion</p>
<p>For a story I did recently, the public information officer monitored my interviews with the director of a program I was writing about, but he did not monitor interviews with students or counselors in that program. I've found that to be that case with other stories I've written: the PIO will monitor interviews with department heads, but not with students and faculty.</p>
<p>I cover more than 50 school districts; only a few of them have PIOs. In most, the district administration assigns someone to deal with me and other media.</p>
<p>Occasionally, if I've gone through the PIO to set up a phone or in-person interview with the state Education Commissioner, the PIO will sit in on the interview. Most of the time I have direct access to either the local superintendent or state commissioner.</p>
<p>If it's the subject is even a bit controversial, the PIOs at some schools sit in.</p>
<p>Public information officers sit in on all of my on-the-record or background calls with officials at the central administration. Sometimes they will conference in when I speak with a principal.</p>
<p>I don't allow it.</p>
<p>This is also a new practice under the [administration]. They send what I call "babysitters" to every interview I do at a school. Usually the younger staff in the communication office come out, and they take furious notes about what we ask and what the interviewee says. This makes the interviewee very nervous, and I feel this is very disrespectful of reporters. Also, if we talk to central office staff they have someone sit in on conference calls.</p>
<p>I once asked a community college faculty union president a few questions after a college trustees meeting, and the PR woman stood right next to him the entire time. Often when I attend a college event, she accompanies me on campus and stands next to me while interviewing college officials.</p>
<p>This is a constant issue whether it's the superintendent I'm interviewing or young students. No matter what the story is the PIO is always there and has even cut interviews short.</p>
<p>I interviewed the superintendent of a local school district and the PIO was there as well.</p>
<p>The PIO sat in on my back-to-school interview with the superintendent.</p>
<p>Public information officers sometimes sit in on interviews in person, or are in the room during conference calls.</p>
<p>If it is with officials about a sensitive matter; otherwise, administrative staff through whom I am trying to get data information, once they have permission, they can correspond with me freely.</p>
<p>Interviews at schools are not monitored, unless it was my series on a turnaround, then it was tightly controlled,</p>

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<p>and I had a district minder at all times. Anything sensitive and they will have a minder with you.</p>
<p>The [Department] is the worst offender in this area, where you can't even name the official in your story unless you argue with them. (I won that argument last year, but haven't been argued recently because I didn't have the luxury of time.) But the PIO always sits in on the interview, whether you like it or not. I find that the PIOs at [University] are much more comfortable staying away, even at private universities.</p>
<p>PIOs often like to sit in on interviews with students. At times that's actually been helpful because the PIO knows the kid and the kid is shy with me but not the PIO.</p>
<p>Some school districts and colleges require a PIO to be at my elbow at all times. Others leave me alone.</p>
<p>Of the school districts I cover with a PIO, they'll try to set up the call so they can sit in.</p>
<p>During a scheduled visit to a school, I had to wait more than half an hour for the district PIO, who was late, to show up so that the interview and class observation could take place.</p>
<p>Again there is no monitoring of meetings with principals, but there is of anyone at the department level, such as an interview I got about homeless students in 2012.</p>
<p>PIOs/communication staff will often sit in on interviews, usually unobtrusively but sometimes recording them. Often request to do phone interviews on speakerphone or at least to be in the room.</p>
<p>For all interviews over the phone, PIO creates a conference call and is in the background.</p>
<p>I've had PIOs sit in on interviews, but more because the source may be nervous than to monitor the interview.</p>
<p>I am doing a story on student discipline. In two districts PIOs attended interviews with superintendents and other officials. Separately during an interview with a superintendent on a pending strike the PIO was there, but she was most in the role of go-for to get documents and information I requested, which actually was helpful.</p>
<p>I started 3 years ago after a series of reporters had the beat and the superintendent was being fired. Every time he spoke to me, it was in a conference call with other administrators and the PIO. They still use this occasionally, but I choose to view it as an opportunity to get more voices and ask them all questions. The PIO gets deployed for lesser administration interviews, but my questions get answered.</p>
<p>When I interviewed an executive at [School], I believe the PIO listened in. This also happened when I interviewed an executive at [Organization]. However, this does not happen in local school districts, the County Office of Education or state Department of Education.</p>
<p>For one visit to a K-12 school district - a feature on district having high-performing campuses - district PIO went with me to both campuses I visited and sat in on all interviews.</p>
<p>In my largest district, the spokeswoman is present for every interview involving a student, including one with a 20-year-old dropout who has enrolled back into high school.</p>
<p>Typically, this spokesperson has sat in on the majority of my interviews with staff, even if it's off-campus. The spokespeople for the colleges I cover also typically sit in on interviews with staff.</p>
<p>Often occurs with high-ranking university officials.</p>
<p>If the superintendent is interviewed, a district pr person will be there. Sometimes this extends to interviews with principals.</p>
<p>Most administration at K-12 school and higher education institutions in my town like to monitor interviews. If there is a PIO available, they usually tag along as well.</p>
<p>Sitting down with administrators to talk about whatever, if he has time, PIO sits in. One recent interview was about 4K program, so really not overtly controversial.</p>
<p>Interviewing an administrator regarding a new gifted student program, the PR person was on the phone the entire time, fed answers to administrator on occasion. Hadn't happened before or since.</p>

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<p>Only time they don't is when I show up to a school or to meetings where I interview folks.</p>
<p>College administrators often require me to go through public information officers as their gatekeepers. Many times, the PIOs will sit in on phone interviews (typically under the pretext that they have arranged the meeting and are making sure it happens). Every six months or so, a PIO will ask me to send questions before an interview -- which I resist.</p>
<p>The new PIO sits in on meetings I have when I interview in person at district headquarters. However, he is not obtrusive. He does not generally sit in on other interviews.</p>
<p>Public information officers sit in on my interviews at times, but it's usually more to offer input or because I asked them to help set up the interviews. Very rarely if ever do they "monitor" my interviews.</p>
<p>Sometimes they will ask to sit in the interviews. If it is a high-ranking official (a university president, for example) I do not object if the PIO sits there silently because the PIO is below that person in rank, and is unlikely to feel intimidated by the PIO.</p> <p>However, if I get the feeling the PIO is manufacturing or engineering a story, then I am more likely to object. I judge each PIO as an individual. Ideally, we are able to form a professional relationship based on understanding of each other's jobs.</p>
<p>Certain employees are more comfortable having the PIO sit in on an interview, but the PIO's presence is not required. The PIO does not interrupt or censor.</p>
<p>When the school PIO is there, he listens but doesn't step in to clarify. It's more to make sure my reporting is accurate after the fact. Given that he's a former journalist it's not surprising however.</p>
<p>K-12 state PIO usually walks over and monitors any interviews I do at meetings, and often conference calls by phone. Some local systems allow me to talk directly to decision-makers. Universities are generally less restrictive, although some want to monitor.</p>
<p>Occasionally on issue stories, that person will sit in, but rarely comments or interferes</p>
<p>Usually pertains when I talk to the superintendent but not others.</p>
<p>Usually, a representative listens in on all phone interviews and is present when I am in a building. This makes it difficult to schedule interviews or visits sometimes because more schedules must be coordinated.</p>
<p>Can't interview someone on the phone or in person from central office without a handler.</p>
<p>They'll have a conference call with me and have PIO present</p>
<p>The community college PIO will frequently listen in on phone interviews, K-12 PIOs rarely do.</p>
<p>They might coordinate the phone call or sit in on the meeting. But, typically, they don't interfere unless they're trying to help (by making sure I have what I need, et cetera).</p>
<p>This happens all the time at the Ministry of Education, but never ever ever at a school or university level.</p>
<p>Typically, there are two ways this happens. A principal or teacher emails quotes in response to a question to the PIO, who forwards the email to me. Or the PIO will sit in on an in-person interview between a principal or teacher and me.</p>
<p>The PIOs attend on-site interviews with administrators, teachers or school-level employees. They sit through the interview and shadow me whenever I am on school premises. When I talk to an administrator (like the superintendent) on the phone, they often are on speaker phone listening and chiming in.</p>
<p>[Department] spokeswoman sat in on interview with chief academic officer. On rare occasions when I get info via email, spokeswoman is CC'd on emails.</p>
<p>Whenever I interview someone in person or over the phone that works directly for the district, not principals or teachers.</p>

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The PIO will sit in on what I think she considers to be an important interview or with a high-profile employee. Sometimes, she says she also wants to learn more about the topic I'm covering.
Some of the K-12 districts I cover will provide teachers or others to speak to, and will attend the interviews. At the local community college I cover, the PIO often sits in on interviews and takes notes.
PIO typically sits in on interviews or is otherwise present.
A lot of the time they will sit in the interview or be in on the phone interview.

Any other thoughts that you would like to add regarding PIOs and newsgathering?
It helps to develop a working relationship with them. I try to regularly meet with my PIOs.
I deal with PIOs in lots of school districts, the state department of education, various education membership associations, and they vary wildly in their interest and ability to help me get what I need. Some are great and very time sensitive. Others basically wait me out until I have no more time. The worst one is probably at the state department of education.
I have found most PIOs I've dealt with, at the state level, in particular, to be condescending, dismissive and very difficult to deal with.
I think sometimes PIOs are so afraid of any bad news getting out that they make it difficult to get any stories good or bad. While it makes it harder for journalists to do our job when PIOs aren't open with information or allowing interviews, there are almost always other sources and avenues available to get the information we need. We just have to work harder.
Because of my state's economic problems, the district I cover, which is a large, urban district, did not have a PIO for several years and I was able to operate with virtually complete freedom. If you had asked me to take this survey one year ago, the answers would have reflected that. However, with a new superintendent in charge, as well as with a PIO back in place, I am finding all too often that schools and administrators are referring me to the PIO before they will speak to me because that is what they seem to have been told to do.
I'd like to add that the PIO at the public university here is very transparent and responsive. The trouble I have is with the private college in my area. This PIO, under direction of the vice president, rarely gives me access to people or information when I need it for news stories - apart from positive, feature stories.
They get paid too much.
Often there's a big difference in the situation. In some school districts, such as [County], I always go to the PIO because he is so good at his job and often finds me someone to interview on a particular subject faster than I could find that person. In other school districts, I have come across PIOs who are just lazy, paranoid, don't know the education issues or are just combative. Over time, I have developed sources around the state and in schools who I can call to find out what is going on so that I don't have to go through the PIO.
The culture of the communication offices in the 40+ school districts in our county, the colleges and universities varies widely. Some are very helpful and some are very obstructive.
State level access in [State] has become more restrictive - questions are answered by the PIO rather than individual employees and the [Department] puts out less information than in prior years.
But I also believe some of the restrictions are in place because there are so many inexperienced reporters, and the PIOs are used as buffers to answer basic questions.

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<p>At state colleges I have noticed that the PIOs often now have other duties so they take longer to respond.</p>
<p>At the K-12 level few districts have PIOs and reporters must learn how to navigate each district's policies.</p>
<p>I have been on both sides (as a news reporter and as a program manager/PR person for educational and government organizations who worked with the media). I have also been a classroom teacher and have family who are teachers. Generally, when speaking with school representatives in my capacity as a reporter, they know this (or gradually come to know this). I generally don't have difficulty dealing with PIOs in educational settings because I treat the ones I encounter with respect. If I do get the run around (and I've had this happen more with local government PIOs than school PIOs), I try to build rapport with the PIO first. If I can't, I then go to the PIO's boss. (That individual generally knows me, and knows that I'm fair and balanced, and will generally have a chat with the PIO.) I also think it depends on the situation; it can be tough dealing with bigger institutions because there are so many layers. But, in general, I suspect that when some reporters are having problems with PIOs, they may not be treating the PIO or educational staff person with the respect he/she deserves. (Example: When I was managing an educational program for a major university, I was the point person with the media for the physician who headed the program. She was one of the top people in her field, and was frequently interviewed by major media like TIME, the New York Times, etc. When approached by their representatives, we were given ample notice because they understood she was likely with patients. But when we received calls from smaller media outlets, their representatives were often clueless, calling with unrealistic turnaround times for her response to news that was not breaking.</p>
<p>Many of the PIO positions have been cut or eliminated in the districts I cover.</p>
<p>Access to schools is a continuing problem, but it is compounded by other duties within a small news organization.</p>
<p>[State] has horrendous sunshine laws and a state government that prefers to hide rather than facilitate. Their issues are long-standing, varied and not conducive to a fair and open flow of communication, let alone watchdog journalism.</p>
<p>Some are great, some are not. That's why my responses are middle-of-the-road and not very specific. One PIO responds within minutes; another ignores my messages but complains after a story runs.</p>
<p>It's not just the PIOs. Some districts conveniently leave important documents off of their online public board document systems, leave certain meetings off of calendars, etc.</p>
<p>I answered this in order to comment that several decades ago I wrote a guide for PIOs of school districts that stressed transparency and access. It was published by the National School Public Relations Association in Bethesda, MD. There may still be such a resource available from NSPRA, though much revised.</p>
<p>A lot of this is conditional; I have a good working relationship with most of the PIOs of the districts I cover, but other districts don't have PIOs so it's the secretaries that make the decision on contact. I'd rather work with a PIO</p>
<p>It's one thing when an agency or school says I can't interview a staff member or state expert on a topic, I do find it to be a different situation when it's a parent who has asked for their sixth grader not to be quoted in the paper - in which case the district doesn't prevent me speaking to the student, only specifically quoting her.</p>
<p>I've found that when dealing with PIOs how receptive they are and how useful depends on the agency and the PIO - for some of the school districts I cover there is no PIO at all, for others the PIO is a person to go to in specific cases - most times I start by calling the person I actually want/need to speak with and may go back to the PIO if I need a suggestion or different angle.</p>

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<p>PIOs can be helpful when it is unclear who a question would be appropriate for, but they can also be obstructionist when they don't like the topic you are writing about.</p>
<p>My worst experience was with a community college during the Occupy movement -- our city's Occupy group camped out at a local community college. The PIOs absolutely did not want to talk about the issues and were very unforthcoming about information. They probably also grossly exaggerated the cost of providing security during the encampment. At the university level, I've learned through public records requests of emails that there is a very high level of discussion about my newsgathering activities almost every time I make a phone call. And there's a fair amount of spinning throughout the process, from the PIO's office. I don't have as much trouble with access, but there's a lot of spinning.</p>
<p>PIOs are a mixed bag. We are often at cross-purposes with this set, but they are sometimes the only people we can get on the phone to facilitate an interview. In that sense, they are a necessary evil. I accept as a matter of course that a PIO enters the equation when a college president needs to be interviewed. What is terribly bothersome, though, is when you find that Joe faculty member or even a dean is hiding behind the PIO. My sense is that this is the mark of an institution where people, who should have a right to share their views, are intimidated about being truthful and cooperative.</p> <p>I think we should also flag as a real problem the practice of PIOs "hand picking" people for interviews. With controversial stories, when a president is under fire, it's not uncommon to be told we should talk to Professor X for his/her view. I'm fine with that if the person is in a duly constituted position of leadership -- say a Senate president -- but I'm leery of being steered toward a faculty member whose lone credential seems to be his/her undying support of an administrator.</p>
<p>Good PIOs are a help, not a hindrance to reporters. They know who the best person to respond to your questions are, and they're usually better able to track somebody down quickly.</p>
<p>In my district, the job detail of the PIO office seems to be more about controlling information and message than providing information. The chief spokesman is also clearly used as a mouthpiece only for controversial issues in which the superintendent wants to remain unnamed. On positive issues, the super jumps right on the phone. The PIO's demeanor can also be very aggressive, which doesn't make for much of a cordial working relationship. Finally, the wide variance in speed of responding to interview and information requests suggests that the PIO office chooses which issues to allow quickly into the news, and which ones to delay. On unflattering issues, a response is always far more difficult to obtain.</p>
<p>I have had experiences at both ends of the spectrum. One district's PIO is pretty helpful; another district's can be pretty difficult to work with.</p>
<p>No problems with PR folk nationally or locally of major impact. If both reporter and PR type are trained, broadly prepared; ex journalists made understanding pr types. Both sides must be fair.</p>
<p>All of these answers are for my K-12 coverage - and the districts are too small to have PIOs.</p> <p>At the state DOE level, there are significant barriers, mostly of a political nature, that lead to dragging feet on requests, lots of push back (why are you doing that story, do this one instead) and - worst - taking my FOIA requests and then putting out a press release / announcement with the info, so it's impossible to get an exclusive. Very frustrating.</p>
<p>Looking over these questions, I realize I've had a pretty good working relationship with some PIOs. However, I am still concerned about the entire system, where information is filtered through the PIO, and where the best stories about government have to be sourced with anonymous sources because only person is allowed to talk to</p>

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you.
I'm only four months into my professional career, but I've found PIOs to be more helpful than hurtful in most instances. The worst offenders when it comes to withholding public information or refusing to let me speak to certain individuals are administrative assistants/receptionists working at small school districts who have no concept of what is public and what is not, are inherently distrustful of media, and therefore shut me out entirely, even when I'm asking very basic questions.
I have good PIOs at two of my K-12 districts and no PIOs at two others. I find that those with PIOs are much easier to work with, even if it means the occasional fight to obtain information.
PIOs in federal, state, and local departments of education should consider that they are public servants. When they help journalists get requested information, they are in essence serving the public more fully. Too often, the US DOE limits access, is cryptic in responses, or gives generic answers.
A good PIO is invaluable, quickly directing me to the right person and finding answers. Sadly, there are few of those left.
I deal with multiple PIOs. Some are more cooperative than others. Usually, they are a helpful resource, directing me to the person most able to answer my questions. Their direct communications to me - press releases; announcements; etc. - are rarely helpful for anything but fluff stories.
The most frequent problem is not with interviewing, but rather with data and information sharing. PIOs will sit on requests for months or even years, regardless of FOIL laws.
The "P" in PIO seems to stand for "prevent" rather than "public." Most see their job as keeping reporters from getting information.
The [Office] gets copies of our Freedom of Information Act requests as soon as they are processed by the Law Department. I am told they have to approve all FOIA requests and that waiting for their approval sometimes takes weeks. I understand that the communications office might want to see FOIA responses so they can be prepared for questions, but I think it is very inappropriate for them to be so involved in the process and to have approval power over them. I am trying to get the Better Government Association to have some lawyers address this issue.
Some districts have lengthy delays before responding to public records requests, which is very frustrating.
They can both help and hinder....
The current district I cover is not as bad as districts I used to cover. But even the current group is slow to respond to records request, they don't quickly respond to questions. They can go too far trying to control the scope a story. In the previous district, they just didn't respond at all.
My favorite PIOs and school districts are the ones who are there to assist when I don't know who knows the most about a topic but who give me freedom to contact district employees. I also love PIOs who have extensive knowledge of all aspects of the school district.
The bigger the district and more embroiled they are in "reform" movement, the more they try to control image of district. Especially in cases where board members are elected in part through large donations from reform organizations and outside campaign money. It is refreshing to go to smaller districts with true community-based board members - PIOs are so happy to have you covering their district and the politics are much better. I understand why school districts want to control image to an extent, especially if they have been burned by shoddy or one-sided journalism - but being fairly new to the beat, I was surprised at how the image control by one large district reminded me very much of the public affairs office with the [Organization] - I spent many years in [State]. I was dumbfounded that I was actually dealing with a public institution and could not wrap my head around the barriers. I really could not believe it, as when dealing with school matters in [State], had

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<p>encountered none of the politics and barriers. I appreciate though, on a story about a fired teacher, the district tried to work with me and get the story done. My BIGGEST problem is the lack of freedom I feel in talking to teachers. SO MANY are deathly afraid to speak for fear of losing their jobs, but I refuse to have my stories contain only talking heads (people not directly involved in classrooms) and so if I have to, will not identify the teacher. But I guess that's a different issue!</p>
<p>While I covered K-12 for 20 years, I felt far more strongly that the role of the PIO was obstructionist. At the higher education level, they are much more helpful -- acting as an expert traffic cop and helping to the right destination than was done at k12. There it felt that they thought they needed to protect to frightened teachers from doing anything that might tick off the principal.</p>
<p>Often seems like PIOs see their job as doing spin control and preventing reporters from, well, reporting. However, there are exceptions, PIOs who do their best to provide information/access efficiently. Distinction is a matter both of personality and institutional policy.</p>
<p>I love good public records laws.</p>
<p>Over time, the trend has been to keep us out of classrooms in the name of protecting student privacy. This makes it hard to report on what's happening there -- which is the info most parents and readers want.</p>
<p>PIOs often tell me I must route comments through them because I need to obey district policy. Students and employees, not me, have to obey district policy. It is the PIO's job to make employees aware of the district's policies for dealing with the media. If I call an employee and they want to talk on the record, I didn't do anything wrong -- something certain school district PIOs fail to understand.</p>
<p>Of the school districts in my coverage area, I have dealt with only one that has a PIO. None of my five core districts have PIOs.</p>
<p>The city here routinely refuses to release stats are not favorable to it For example, it has routinely denied my request for data on homeless students that it is required to collect and indeed does collect under federal law.</p>
<p>I cover two school districts, and one of them is fantastic, but the other is impossible.</p>
<p>I've found being very upfront about what's coming -- i.e. this is your chance to help shape the conversation, it's happening -- keeps a civil relationship going even in strained times.</p>
<p>For the most part, I have found PIOs to be helpful because they put me in contact with the people with whom I need to speak. Sometimes it's harder to get info out of agencies that have no PIO because district staffers tend to err on the side of not returning phone calls unless someone tells them it's OK to talk to the press. As a reporter who used to cover cities, I find school district PIOs less intrusive than corporate PIOs or paid PR consultants. Like many other education writers, however, I have been frustrated by the [Department] staffers practice of refusing to be quoted by name. What are they afraid of? Accountability?</p>
<p>Because I cover so many districts, I appreciate having a PIO to get me in touch with students or other people I need to speak to for feature stories. However, I get frustrated when a PIO tries to change up my story to fit the district's agenda.</p>
<p>Too often PIOs are happy to release what they consider "happy" news, but when it's not something they control, they can be far more difficult.</p>
<p>Often PIOs will assure us that we can get an interview, then wait a few days to tell us right on deadline it's not going to happen. The best PIOs (at other school districts) will often ask me why I'm calling them, if I know who I need to speak with, and there are no barriers.</p>
<p>It's up to the superintendent in the local public school district on whether I get access or not. This leads to agreeing to a lot of pieces that aren't necessarily hard news and other requests for interviews for some stories are not granted.</p>

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<p>Seems to be a trend by government bodies to try to control news media. Perhaps had to do with the fact that money is tighter and people more critical.</p>
<p>[City] came down hard on a principal I interviewed who admitted he was planning to hire his wife to work at his school; after that, he told not only faculty members, but parents also, that they were forbidden to talk with press-- so it reaches beyond the school staff members to try to lock down information from all members of the school community. Disturbing. (To note, some parents talked with us anyway. And we were told teachers were threatened that their jobs would be on the line if they spoke with press.)</p>
<p>I think I have been fortunate in my district and the power its PIOs have over news coverage. I've almost always been able to go directly to people in the district I need to talk to. If I always had to go through the PIOs, it would be a very frustrating process and I would not be getting the same amount of information.</p>
<p>Ours here in [City] is really restrictive, mainly because they work more for the mayor than for the actual district.</p>
<p>I'm astonished by how many PIOs for public agencies are wanting to speak only "on background" these days -- not for attribution.</p>
<p>PIOs need more experience not first year people who have no idea what they are doing.</p>
<p>It's my job to get "regular" people to talk to me. Often, this takes a long time with educators and PIOs. I have found they are more open when they believe you will treat them fairly, and you make it a point to learn about them. This allows me to naturally go around the PIO, rather than a bull in a china shop approach, which rarely works in K12 education reporting.</p>
<p>I am lucky enough to work in a county where most school districts trust me and work with me well. I also work in a county in which only a few schools have public information officials. It's more likely that a superintendent will direct questions go through himself/herself if there's a controversy.</p>
<p>For me, the worst public-information problem is sluggish response. I can handle going through a PIO for information, but in the case of the K-12 district I cover, attempting to play by the rules usually yields a whole bunch of nothing. The PIO selectively returns my calls and emails based on what she wants covered. Even positive information seems to be trapped behind a cement wall sometimes.</p>
<p>I cover every university in my state, and the response varies drastically from one institution to the next. The PIO at the flagship university is obstructionist, refuses to respond to questions or requests in any form other than email and takes ages to answer her emails. At the other major public university in the state, the PIO is generally much more helpful.</p>
<p>The PIO I deal with doesn't interfere whatsoever with my newsgathering and I am not prohibited from interviewing anyone.</p>
<p>They do like to try to keep "bad" news out of the press, and occasionally put up barriers in an effort to do that.</p>
<p>I used to work with a PIO who let principals handle their own PR and seek help when necessary. Now I work with a much more centralized approach (same school system) that makes it much more difficult to build relationships at schools.</p>
<p>Depending on the school district (I cover 5 medium size and several other small ones) I get different level of responsiveness. In those districts where I know PIO is hard to deal with, I email requests with copies to Superintendent, PIO, and Independent parties. That gets me through more quickly.</p>
<p>I think many PIOs have a lack news judgment and are fearful of building a relationship with the media, which would benefit both sides.</p>
<p>In the best situations, the PIO will provide access to the best person in the district to answer a question. In some districts, the PIO will try to be the "voice" and answer the question herself/himself, even when lacking the expertise required.</p>

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<p>I have found that it is easier to have a relationship with press people who deal with interview/comment requests as many used to be journalists. I have a harder time dealing with individual who is in charge of APRA (FOIA) requests.</p>
<p>I believe public records laws are routinely being violated by some agencies. Some officials in my state have used private email accounts to conduct state and university business.</p>
<p>It's important to see things from their perspective.</p>
<p>I have an excellent relationship with all of the communications folk I interact with, though lately the provincial government seems to be tightening the info they're letting out. For example, the [Office] seems to have to give their OK for someone to talk to me about anything at all. I foresee this becoming a huge problem and it's already caused some issues with interviews (though has never impacted a story... only my sanity).</p>
<p>At a local school level, teachers and principals have been instructed not to talk to media unless they let the communications guy know. This hasn't been a problem, though, as I have a good relationship with the POI and he knows I will be fair and balanced in my reporting, so he's happy to give me access to anyone about anything.</p>
<p>In general, the school system PIO I work with now is the most open one I have ever had. She doesn't seek to stop us from doing stories on anything, even topics that reflect negatively on the school system. However, I have previously had some closed PIOs to deal with, and even this school system could stand to be a little more open -- but I fault that on a reluctance by some principals and teachers to speak with the media rather than on the PIO, who usually accommodates my requests.</p>
<p>Most of this is related to the spokeswoman at the [Department], who is hostile toward my employer and has recently taken to responding to my requests only by email (rather than phone). Local school districts are too small to have PIOs. Some districts prefer nearly all comment to come from the superintendent, while others are more open.</p>
<p>Most PIOs I encounter in education are very helpful but that isn't always the case in other areas I cover outside of education.</p>
<p>Where I work, there is an intense pressure from above that makes teachers unlikely to talk because they fear that it will jeopardize their job status or future in the district.</p>
<p>For the most part, I've had an overwhelming positive experience with one, and a frustrating experience with the other. In my opinion, the latter is partly because she does not have a good understanding of my job and the work I need to do.</p>
<p>Going through public information officers - ironically - is not a good way to get an interview. All they do is delay things and make your job harder. I only use them when it is required and then I try to figure out how to circumvent them. They are typically a disruption rather than an aid.</p>
<p>I think it is especially difficult in small towns to circumnavigate PIOs and get staff-level people to speak on the record, because gossip spreads quickly and — especially in this funding climate in education and the economy in general — people are worried they'll be found out as a source and lose their job.</p>
<p>I cover a district that is relatively open. Some school principals are better about allowing me onto campus than others.</p>
<p>I have covered many industries and government institutions and only started covering education 2 years ago. I would say the caliber of the typical education press officer is not as high as in, say, a House leadership office or Google Corp HQ, but regardless of their sophistication, all of them try to block press access to certain stories. It's my job to keep hounding. Education press officers are not more restrictive or controlling than others.</p>

<p>If the public records request was fulfilled, did they provide you with the information you asked for? If sort of, please explain.</p>
<p>I asked for the number of "parent refusals" on state tests. She supplied a graphic with four years of information, but she declined to provide information on what constitutes a "parent refusal." I asked if a parent has to write a letter, have a meeting with the principal etc. She said it's locally decided, but I don't believe that at all. As the central agency dealing with state tests and the synthesizer of all the data, I think they have a very defined role in tallying that number.</p>
<p>Not all, and the district failed to provide a clear explanation of why a good portion of the request was not fulfilled.</p>
<p>Most recently I made a request for the 2012-13 payroll. Five years ago, I received a list with every employee's name, salary and other info. This time, the list I received was by job title with no names and was useless. I have submitted a new request and even shared with them the Excel spreadsheet they provided me with five years ago to show them they have complied with such requests in the past. That was a few days ago. I am still waiting.</p>
<p>We find that the school districts wait until the full 30 days is up to give us the information and often want to charge more than they should. In the old days, when my paper had lots of money, we would fight these sorts of roadblocks and the departments knew it so they would hand over what we wanted. I have noticed more recently that government agencies are less likely to hand over as much because I think they are starting to understand we don't have the money anymore to take them to court.</p>
<p>I asked for information about construction projects at Clemson University over the past five years. I was not given any information at first about projects that had started but not been completed during that time, or projects that started before that time and were completed during that time.</p>
<p>If I'm dealing with my state's education department, they'll usually respond with a link to the appropriate law, even if I ask for someone to comment on a specific issue</p>
<p>Usually you have to go back and argue. They'll provide some of what you want, but not everything, or they leave out whole sections all together.</p>
<p>They claimed a lot of the material was exempt under FOIA laws - as usual</p>
<p>They didn't give us all the documents. That was a university, not a school district.</p>
<p>Most recently, I was seeking details of a buy-out contract between a local school board and superintendent. After making it difficult to get the info, much of it was redacted. The only info I had access to was the monetary terms of the buyout, all information regarding the superintendents reason for leaving was redacted.</p>
<p>Well, you never know what they left out. It has always seemed like they provide the bare minimum they can get away with. At a large university I cover -- a major national institution -- the release is vetted by somebody very high in administration. They are carefully controlling their image.</p>
<p>It's not uncommon to receive heavily redacted material. Increasingly common is the prohibitive cost of securing records. I sympathize that there is work involved in securing these materials, but colleges are notorious for setting dizzying expectations for the cost off fulfilling a request.</p>
<p>Yes, it just takes months and months and sometimes the story is old by then.</p>
<p>In some instances there were legal exemptions. But it's been too long to recall the details.</p>

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The college ultimately gave me the documents I requested, but only after I won an appeal with the PA Office of Open Records, a state agency, and then only after I was adamant that I would not come to campus for a meeting with college officials prior to receiving the documents (their pre-spin tactic).
They have been good about providing the information. With the most recent request, though, they ignored the request and sent a completely different set of documents. I do think that was intentional.
I recently put in a similar records request to two institutions. The first responded enthusiastically -- but I found that the documents provided were incomplete. The second has not responded. Our attorneys are now on the case.
Did not cite statutory exceptions, as required by state law.
Price was too high to have entire request fulfilled.
Sometimes requests are incomplete.
They provided answers to a set list of basic questions (for specific numbers, statistics) but then delayed in providing redacted records.
Partial compliance, or "misunderstanding" the request.
I did two requests, one for a superintendent evaluation, one for outgoing email from School Board members. I received the evaluation the same day I requested it. I was told the School Board emails will take longer.
Some documents were withheld citing exclusions. I had to go to the office to view the records, then request and pay for copies, despite my request for electronic copies.
Most of the time yes. However, information I need is sometimes "not tracked" or compiling it for me would cost more than my news outlet can pay. The costs seem very inflated by the school district on occasion.
It was about the huge number of long, paid leaves granted to teachers. They provided an accounting of what it cost and number of administrative paid leaves, but refused to generalize about what the leaves were for, or provide names and charges involved in investigations, which by California law they should. We'll have to get our lawyer involved to go forward, which my editors have yet to do.
Some questions are ignored. Also, the state law is that they are supposed to respond quickly but if they are going to take longer than 10 days or fight it, they have to tell journalists. This is often misinterpreted -- by journalists as well as your above question indicates -- that they have 10 days to get us the info (even if it's readily available and could be sent immediately).
Sometimes they are great with records requests, and sometimes we have to ask multiple times to get what we originally requested.
I request paper records and get a database. Information is routinely deleted from databases citing FOIA exemptions --- then subsequent requests come back with that information included. They create lots of databases which is not only above and beyond the law, it's time consuming and less informative. Just about all records requests come back so late they're no longer timely or useful. And I'm 97 percent sure all requests get screened by PIO so ones really harmful to district take the longest.
Will either not answer with specific information or will only answer half of my inquiries.
I have extensive experience with open records, and I have found that institutions' responses vary quite widely.
I get the information but not always in computerized form. Sometimes I get financial data in paper form that's not easily inputted into a spreadsheet program without typing it in. But I get the info even if it doesn't come in the form I'd like.
In my most case of seeking a public record, the superintendent accommodated my request immediately.
They sent a form letter citing privacy laws; the information was given to me after I sent another request stating that we would not publish any identifying information.
In the system I cover most often, I usually don't use the open records process because our state has a poor open

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records law and much of what I need isn't covered by it. So I have to negotiate, ask and ask again.
I'm still waiting for the latest one.
I've had varying degrees of success depending on the record that was requested. The more potentially controversial, the more the "records" provided are not exactly what I was looking for, even if the APRA request was written with reasonable specificity. If I appeal the request and say their response didn't answer the request, they'll just use one of the exceptions allowed to them under the law in order to avoid answering it.
They provided some of the information I requested, but other documents I expected to be in the request were not included. I had a sneaking suspicion things were left out, but I couldn't prove it or come up with another request to probe deeper.
I had requested school districts' responses to a DOE survey. Spokeswoman sent some but said not all had come in yet, and she would send more as they arrived. I doubt I received all the responses that DOE had.
It frequently will have most of the information, while leaving some bits of the request out altogether.
They provide the bare minimum amount of information and often send either too much so I must go through a lot of data or push back against redacted info or almost threaten that I will have to pay large amount of money to get the data.
The school district was not able to provide records from as far back as I'd asked for.
There's rarely any evidence common sense is used in this process. If you ask for something for "Jon. H. Smith" and the record is listed for "Jon smith," you usually need to make a second request.
They sent it to the attorney general's office for an opinion on whether they had to release the documents.
They show just their better work,

Did the PIO or custodian answer questions you had about the public records or the information you were seeking? If sort of, please explain.
In coded language. My questions were not answered directly; I had to ask the question(s) several times, in several different ways.
Told me they would try to get the info but never did
Once I actually know something the PIO becomes much more helpful in an effort to spin information a particular way.
After more than a month of extensions and delays the request was denied citing an exemption in state law.
They answer with vague language or say something to the effect of, "The office cannot respond at this time."
PIO offers vague responses or "I have to get back to you on that" and never does.
The last time I had to turn in a request for public records/information I gave it to an office secretary not the PIO and I think she just wanted the form as cover for handing over the documents - which she did immediately after I handed her the form.
I had some questions about how to interpret the document and she just referred me back to the document.
Sometimes, we have found out after the fact that information was likely left out.
I've submitted maybe 3-5 public records requests in recent years. Often administrators won't even answer my e-mails or messages about them, sometimes referring me to their attorneys, who usually give vague and unhelpful answers.
Usually, I need to go through communications in order to get the person who provided the information to explain

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it to me. The FOIA officer and the PIO don't typically know a lot about the information they are providing.
Did not immediately break down the price to figure out how I could pay less.
Mostly pleaded ignorance.
They said the data did not exist when we knew for a fact that it did.
This district has no PIO so I was speaking with an attorney. She answered some questions, but was contradicted by a trustee, so I was unable to get clarity about who was telling the truth, since the documents were related to closed session discussions.
It was handled by the head of HR; I generally go straight to the top and CC the PIO.
She directed me to the person I needed to speak to about the records that were released.
Some were answered, some not. As one PIO put it: "I'm not going to go point by point through this."
I requested the salary of the local school superintendent, since a contract had not been posted for a couple years. I spoke to a HR representative to see what the process of opening the file would be and she routed me to the PIO, who happens to be the superintendent. I was turned away and had to use old numbers instead.
The person who handles public records requests in the PIO's office does not answer questions about public records, but other records custodians in the district are much more helpful. If I am able to go directly to one of them, I usually have more success.
Everything in this district just takes forever. They also don't act in the spirit of the law, more like the letter...
The person did so to the best of his/her ability but is working in a large and cumbersome bureaucracy.
Very vague answers.
Mostly just clarifying exactly what I wanted but also trying to figure out what I was working on.
The PIO always responds before and after I file a request to try to put a positive spin on what I'm asking for. Sometimes they will also respond by telling me I can't have the data I'm asking for because they don't store it in the way I am requesting.
The government official, understandably, was not going to sit down with me and interpret the figures. I had to do that myself.