Making the Media Work for You

In our advocacy for children and youth with disabilities and/or gifts and talents, their families and the professionals who work with them, the essence of our job is to make our voices heard. As CAN Coordinators, you do this in a variety of ways, from developing relationships with your members of Congress, building a network in your state unit or division, developing an online social media presence and of course engaging with the media.

There are a variety of different ways to engage with the media – from commenting on stories to issuing press releases and media advisories regularly for events and advocacy pushes in your area. This March newsletter, however, is specifically about how you, and your unit or division, can use CEC’s Op-Ed to ensure that the voice of children and youth with exceptionalities, their families, and the professionals who work with them are heard.

What is an Op-Ed?

An op-ed, which is short for “opposite the editorial page,” is an article which expresses the opinion of the writer, who is not affiliated with the paper. What this means is that newspapers, and more importantly their readers, are looking to read other’s opinions on the issues faced by a particular community or state, or even nation. You can use this to your advantage. When you get an op-ed published in a local paper, you’ve gotten the media outlet to act as your mouth piece. With one short article, you’ve reached, hundreds or thousands of people.

Tips and Tricks for Op-Eds

1. Make sure to state your opinions clearly and concisely. Op-eds are definitely the place for strong language about the impact (positive or negative) of a certain policy or issue.

2. Use specifics! Just because this is an opinion piece doesn’t mean you don’t need to back up your claims with data. That data can be anecdotal if you know how a certain law will impact your school, students, teachers, and/or ability to provide services. But the more (accurate and verified) numbers you can use, the better.

3. Mention your elected officials by name. Whether you’re directing your op-ed to the House, the Senate, or any other elected position, make sure you use the person’s name directly in the
piece. Appeal to them to take the direction you’re advocating for. Most elected officials have someone in their office whose job it is every morning to find all pieces of media that mention that elected official’s name. Make sure you end up in their morning pile!

4. Keep your op-eds timely and relevant. While an issue may be important to you and your community, if it hasn’t been in the news recently, your op-ed is unlikely to be published. Make sure that your op-ed is tied to a timely piece of legislation or action.

How to Do It!

Sometimes, CEC will provide these for you. In the weeks leading up to the sequestration cuts that began on March 1, we had an op-ed on the Legislative Action Center. To send this, all you have to do is type in your zip code, add a little bit of personalization (including data and the names of your elected officials), and then hit send.

If there is a particular issue that has come up in the news lately, and you are interested in writing an op-ed for your local paper even though CEC has not provided one, let us know! We’d be happy to help you in any way we can from helping you find data points, to ghost writing the op-ed as we do newsletter articles, to reading over what you’ve written yourself.

Whether you’re using one of CEC’s op-eds or you’ve written your own, CEC’s Legislative Action Center is a helpful tool. Just head to CEC’s Legislative Action Center and click on the tab at the top that says Media Guide. After that you just type in your zip code and you will be presented with a variety of media outlets in your area where you can send your op-ed.

As always let us know when you get published so that we can publicize your op-ed to the rest of the CEC members. Like this one, which was published in a Pennsylvania news outlet called the Patriot News, and was submitted by our CAN Coordinator for Pennsylvania, Chris Tabakin. Way to go, Pennsylvania!

If you have any questions, comments or concerns, please email us at sarad@cec.sped.org or give us a call at 703-264-9498.