

Tips for covering education

1. Firmly establish your role in the minds of the school administrators and board members you're working with. You're not there to be their cheerleader, but you're not the Witchfinder General either. Let them know that.
2. Be fair. There's a lot to criticize public education for, but there's also a lot of things they get right every day. It doesn't benefit society, the schools or yourself to use public schools as a piñata. Write about the things they get wrong, but also be sure to point out the things they're doing right.
3. Get to know your local PTO folks. These are the most active and engaged parents in the school systems, and the ones most likely to tell you what's "really" going on in the schools.
4. Understand the role of interest groups. There are a lot of players in education, and not all of them have children as their No. 1 priority. Before accepting a report or statement as gospel, think about who released it and what their goals and motivations are. Teachers unions will always say teachers don't get paid enough, anti-government groups will always say they get paid too much, a think tank with links to a text book publisher will always say the textbooks currently being used in schools are junk if they're published by a competitor, etc.
5. Carefully watch the personnel agenda of your local school system. You can learn a lot from who's being hired, fired, transferred or getting a few extra supplements.
6. Understand open records and meetings laws. File open records requests as often as you need to.

Tips on covering government

1. Understand open records and meetings laws. File open records requests as often as you need to. Know the open meetings laws so you can tell the governmental body you officially protest their closed meeting.
2. Earn the trust of those you cover. Be fair, but also be firm.
3. Understand that a source is not a friend. They will be your friend until you write something that puts them in a negative light.
4. Look at trends, i.e. city finances.
5. Don't just talk with public officials. Talk to "real people," the people who are affected by the decisions of public officials.
6. Hold public officials accountable. Follow the money. It's public money. Citizens have a right to know how and where their money is spent.
7. Learn the rules that govern meetings.

Both sheets of tips are from Ken Tuck, managing editor and regional editor ~~and writer~~ at The Dothan Eagle.

Court reporting tips

1. Get to know the people watching the trial or court hearing. You never know who they are and how they might be related or interested in the case.
2. Following up. Try to talk to the victim's family in the case (usually sitting in the audience).
3. Try to talk to family and or friends of the defendant in court. They're usually in the audience or hanging around in the hallway. Both the victim's family and defendant's family and friends will likely give you good impact quotes.
4. In covering long cases, try to pick the most compelling testimony from the most interesting witnesses to publish for the story.
5. Be observant of both the victim in the case and the defendant. You never know how they will react to testimony during the trial. It's often important to note the reactions and emotions of the both the victim and defendant in court whether it's crying, comments made or throwing up their arms.
6. In covering criminal cases, be sure to include comments and arguments from both the prosecution and the defense lawyers.
7. Always double check spelling of witnesses who testify. Sometimes prosecutor and defense lawyers don't have their own witnesses names spelled right.
8. Research online. In Alabama you can use Pacer and Alacourt. These are great sites to see if any motions have been filed and get more information cases and the defendant's past court record.
9. It is the judge's courtroom. What he says go. That is his domain.
10. If texting and/or computer use is allowed in court, Tweet and Facebook important parts of the trial. Or text, your editor or colleague in the office who can do that for your. But, if the judge says that's not allowed, do not do it.

THE DOTHAN EAGLE

Enterprise Ledger • Jackson County Floridan • The Dothan Progress
Headland Observer • Ashford Power • Army Flier
Wiregrass Marketplace • Opelika-Auburn News

227 N. OATES ST. • DOTHAN, ALABAMA 36303 • (334)792-3141