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Reuters/Jonathan Ernst

**Invisible: 1.4 Percent Coverage for
Education is Not Enough**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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News coverage is important to every policy area. While some people have personal knowledge of certain topics, many rely on mass media for direct, up-to-date, and in-depth reporting. This is especially the case with education because only a third of American adults currently have a child in elementary or secondary school. What most people know about schools comes from newspapers, radio, television, the Internet, or blogs – or from memories of their own experiences, often from long ago.

Yet despite the importance of media coverage for public understanding of education, news reporting on schools is scant. As we note in this report, there is virtually no national coverage of education. During the first nine months of 2009, only 1.4 percent of national news coverage from television, newspapers, news Web sites, and radio dealt with education.¹ This paucity of coverage is not unique to 2009. In 2008, only 0.7 percent of national news coverage involved education, while 1.0 percent did so in 2007. This makes it difficult for the public to follow the issues at stake in our education debates and to understand how to improve school performance.

Community colleges fare especially poorly in the constellation of news coverage. Of all the education reporting, only 2.9 percent is devoted to two-year institutions of higher learning, compared to 12.5 percent for colleges and 14.5 percent for universities (the rest goes to elementary and secondary schools). The lack of attention devoted to community colleges is noteworthy because even though they enroll 6.7 million students compared to 11.2 million for colleges and universities, two-year schools attract only one-tenth the news coverage of four-year institutions. From the standpoint of national media coverage, community colleges barely exist.

Of the education news that is reported across any education level, little relates to school policies and ways to improve the curriculum or learning processes. There was hardly any coverage of school reform, teacher quality, or other matters thought to be crucial for educational attainment. Instead, most stories this year dealt with budget problems, school crime, and the H1N1 flu outbreak. The emphasis on school budgets isn't surprising given the country's dismal economic news. Indeed, educational finance and the economic stimulus package together made up 17 percent of all national stories this year. However, the lack of coverage of the actual work of schools remains a significant problem.

It is hard for newspapers and television stations to assign reporters to cover the schools when circulation and advertising revenues have fallen. Double-digit unemployment shrinks the base of newspaper subscribers, and the market for the products and services that are advertised in newspapers. And newspapers are facing well-known challenges from other areas, leading to buy-outs and layoffs

¹ Coverage is defined as the percent of space devoted to a topic as a percentage of the overall space available for content (number of words for print and online, amount of time for radio and television).

across the industry. The impact on newspapers and broadcast outlets has been dramatic and has led to expanding news holes, leaving less room for coverage not only of education but also of many other policy areas.

Even if the economy recovers, long-term trends do not bode well for education coverage. Newspaper subscriptions peaked in the late 1980s. From 1990 to 2008, the number of subscribers declined steadily, for a total decline of 22 percent², at the same time that the population of the U.S. increased by 22 percent. Beat reporters who cover education and other policy areas are being laid off and not replaced.

News aggregators focusing on education bring together reports and analyses from around the country. Citizen-initiated journalism such as blogs, YouTube videos, Facebook postings, I-comments, and the like are helpful with breaking news and commentary on events ranging from shootings to flu outbreaks. Local blogs can encourage substantive debate on education issues, and school systems have used new technologies to keep parents in closer touch with their children's schools and educational progress. But none of these can replace regular, systematic and ongoing coverage of education by news outlets.

In terms of print outlets, there are important differences in the way local and national media cover education. Local outlets are more likely to cover the substance of school policy than national media. Local journalists go to school board meetings, interview local education officials, and keep track of debates that unfold over curricula, teacher quality, and structural reforms. They are more closely tied to the actual content of education because people in the community worry about the education young people are receiving, especially parents who read their publications and watch their broadcasts. But it is difficult for local outlets to maintain the quality of their coverage in the face of financial cutbacks and staff layoffs.

In the conclusion of this report, we make a number of recommendations to improve the coverage of education. The disappearance of education news coverage is so pervasive and rooted in so many different causes that it will take a concerted effort on the part of all involved (news organizations, education administrators, government leaders, school boards, parents, students, and community leaders) to slow, much less reverse, this trend.

We believe there are a number of steps for improving the quantity and quality of education coverage that will make a positive difference:

1. Schools need to understand that communications is important to their education mission. Time spent to inform reporters, parents, and the community about what is happening inside schools is a good investment in public understanding.
2. Young people can be a valuable part of this communications effort through student newspapers, social media, citizen journalism, and other outreach activities. Budget cutbacks are reducing extracurricular

² <http://www.naa.org/TrendsandNumbers/Total-Paid-Circulation.aspx>

activities of all kinds, including student newspapers. Some school officials discourage student reporters from asking difficult questions or raising controversial issues. In fact, student journalism of this kind should be encouraged. Student newspapers often lead the media to important education stories.

3. Government officials and education administrators must draw attention to education policy through events, forums, and speeches that highlight noteworthy reforms and discuss ongoing problems and challenges. Public officials have an agenda-setting and problem-definition capacity that can drive news coverage. This is especially the case for community colleges in order to boost their local, regional, and national profile.
4. Reporting should become more proactive and less reactive. Much of coverage today is episodic and driven by events. Focusing on long-term trends would help to inform communities about the content of education and ways schools are seeking to move forward.
5. Reporters should draw on education research in the way that health care reporters use medical research. Journalists who follow medicine and health often highlight new studies, clinical trials, or other evaluative research that help consumers understand new treatments, new drugs, and new medical therapies. There should be better use of education research that evaluates school reforms, teacher quality, and classroom practices.
6. Newspapers and other media outlets that have cut back on education reporting should reconsider these decisions both on public interest grounds, and also because there is widespread interest in the issues surrounding education - on the part of parents especially, but also among employers and other community leaders. It is only through on-going, day-to-day beat reporting that journalists develop an understanding of the subject, gain a sure feel for the issues at stake, and develop sources who keep them informed.
7. Media publishers and editors should find ways to integrate quality education blogs and forms of citizen journalism into press outlets. Newspapers could develop their own blogs and community talkbacks, and also provide links to education blogs that already exist in the community. This could help fill the policy void left by staff cutbacks on education beats.
8. Foundations and non-profit organizations should focus on developing alternative forms of education coverage both nationally and locally. At both levels, they should encourage more emphasis on reporting about teaching and teaching methods, curricula, course offerings, testing and other issues that directly affect learning and are receiving scant ongoing coverage. They can also encourage both investigative journalism and in-depth reporting of particularly successful (and troubled) schools and school systems.

The Challenge of Education Coverage in a Weak Fiscal Environment

Education is one of the most crucial issues facing the United States. With 50 million students enrolled in public pre-kindergarten, elementary, and secondary schools, another six million in non-public k-12 institutions, and 18 million in postsecondary institutions, education represents a fundamental mechanism for social and economic advancement and long-term civic engagement.

But the ability of the general public to understand what is happening in elementary and secondary schools, as well as higher education, is limited by the current collapse of traditional media organizations. Rising unemployment and a declining economy have placed enormous fiscal pressures on news organizations. The simultaneous declines in ad revenues and circulation levels have undermined the traditional business model of newspapers, radio, and television networks. At the same time, the emergence of new competitors in the form of Internet web sites and bloggers has intensified the competition among media outlets.

This “perfect storm” of financial disaster for the American media arises at an inopportune time for secondary and post-secondary education. The 2001 iteration of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Public Law 107-110), better known as “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB), is due for reauthorization. This legislation featured several innovative elements: accountability standards in public schools; biennial National Assessment of Educational Progress testing in math and reading at grades 4 and 8; a new focus on reading; sanctions for failed schools; and greater flexibility on school choice, among other things.

In addition, \$5 billion in new money for state and local education through the Race to the Top and Innovation Funds made available through the Economic Recovery and Reinvestment Act means that school authorities have the chance to think about new ways of operating schools. Between the fiscal crisis and the new federal money, officials can experiment with changes in education structure, content, and operations.

In the abstract, the debate over the stimulus bill and the reauthorization of key legislation provided a valuable opportunity for the education community and general public to discuss the federal role in education, debate policy alternatives, and make systemic changes that would improve education. For example, some advocates have suggested that schools need flexibility to develop other performance indicators beyond standardized test scores as a way of defining effective schools. District success is also reflected in outcomes such as truancy rates, college readiness, and student success in accelerated coursework, to name a few.

Others have called for a renewed attention on teacher quality and tying teacher pay to students’ academic performance. Studies have found that teacher quality is the most consistently important factor in student achievement, especially in elementary and secondary education, outside of family background. Yet unlike

other sectors of the economy in which higher levels of individual performance are associated with higher pay, teachers are nearly always compensated under a single salary schedule in which pay is determined by years of service and post-baccalaureate course credits.

Despite the opportunity for an enlightening discussion, a weak news industry undermines the Fourth Estate's ability to provide in-depth coverage of all these issues.

Evaluating News Coverage of Education

We examine several issues here. One is the absolute quantity of coverage in relation to other issues. A second is the specific focus of education coverage: what is being reported? A third is the relationship between national, state, and local news coverage of education. A fourth is the rise of new media and how these outlets compare to traditional media.

To see how different parts of the media cover education, we examined several kinds of coverage. We commissioned the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism to study what gets covered by the national media, including reporting by the television networks, cable TV, talk radio, leading web sites, and national newspapers. Its staff looked at 551 education stories that were reported from January through September 2009 and also compared news coverage in 2007 and 2008. In addition, our staff at Brookings examined 691 Associated Press wire stories to see what topics garnered the most coverage and how this compared to the rest of the national media. Finally, we undertook case studies of leading blogs devoted to education and local newspaper coverage in four communities: Phoenix, Arizona; Providence, Rhode Island; Des Moines, Iowa; and Minneapolis, Minnesota. We chose these areas to provide geographic diversity among mid-sized cities in the United States.

A Dearth of Education Coverage

At the national level, we found that education coverage is virtually invisible. Except for specialized publications such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Education Week*, there is a dearth of education coverage in the mainstream media. Other than coverage of school sports, disease outbreaks, and periodic student crime sprees, the volume of coverage is certainly not equal to education's importance as a policy issue. Our review found that education simply does not generate the volume of coverage received by other major issues.

The Project for Excellence in Journalism analysis of news coverage by national television networks, cable TV, talk radio, leading web sites, and newspapers found only 1.4 percent of coverage in 2009 related to education, including preschool, elementary, middle, secondary, and higher education, only marginally higher than in 2008, when only 0.7 percent of the newshole dealt with education, and 2007, where the figure was 1.0 percent.

During 2009, the most common subjects of news reporting consisted of government (11.3 percent), economics (11.3 percent), foreign affairs (9.8 percent), health care (9.2 percent), business (7.7 percent), and crime (6.2 percent). In 2008, the campaign attracted 34 percent of all the news coverage, followed by economics (11.2 percent). And in 2007, the most frequent subjects for national news were U.S. foreign affairs (17.2 percent), the campaign (13.1 percent), non U.S. foreign news (11.3 percent), and crime (7.5 percent).

Part of the problem with education coverage is that it is episodic, reactive, and focused on major events. For example, President Obama's speech to students in September accounted for many stories at that time – stories focused far more on the politics surrounding Obama's speech than anything having to do with education itself.

National Media Coverage (percent of Newshole)³	Jan-Sept., 2009	2008	2007
Government	11.3%	4.0%	6.4%
Campaign/Elections/Politics	5.0	34.0	13.1
Defense/military (domestic)	1.2	1.5	2.4
Court/Legal system	1.8	0.2	0.4
Crime	6.2	4.8	7.5
Domestic Terrorism	3.4	1.2	1.8
Business	7.7	4.2	3.2
Economics	11.3	11.2	3.6
Environment	1.5	1.6	1.7
Development/Sprawl	0.0	0.1	0.2
Transportation	0.8	0.9	0.8
Education	1.4	0.7	1.0
Religion	0.4	0.7	0.7
Health/Medicine	9.2	2.7	3.9
Science/Technology	1.5	1.1	1.2
Race/Gender/Gay issues	1.9	0.9	1.1
Immigration	0.5	0.7	2.8
Additional domestic affairs	2.4	1.8	2.4
disasters/accidents	1.9	3.7	4.7
celebrity/entertainment	2.1	0.4	2.0
Lifestyle	2.5	2.1	3.4
Sports	1.5	1.4	1.9
Media	1.6	1.3	2.5
U.S. Misc.	2.7	2.0	2.8
U.S. Foreign affairs	9.8	6.5	17.2
Foreign (non-U.S.)	10.3	10.3	11.3
<i>Total number of stories</i>	51,374	69,942	70,737

Source: Project for Excellence in Journalism National Media Analysis, 2007, 2008, and Jan-Sept., 2009

³ Newshole is the space devoted to a topic as a percentage of the overall space available for content (number of words for print and online, amount of time for radio and television).

Little Coverage of Community Colleges

Education coverage is not commensurate to the number of students enrolled in a given level of education. For example, 2.2 percent of national news stories looked at pre-schools, 12.3 percent centered on elementary education, 10.7 percent focused on middle schools, 20.1 percent emphasized secondary schools, 2.9 percent focused on community colleges, 12.5 percent emphasized colleges, and 14.5 percent looked at universities. Nearly one-quarter (24.7 percent) mentioned no school level in particular.

The relative paucity of media attention devoted to community colleges is noteworthy. Even though American community colleges enroll 6.7 million students, compared to 11.2 million⁴ for colleges and universities, two-year schools attract only one-tenth the news coverage of four-year institutions. From the standpoint of national media coverage, community colleges barely exist.

This is problematic because community colleges offer major avenues of opportunity, especially for poor and working class students attracted by their low tuition costs relative to four-year schools, their locations in easily accessible places, and course offerings often scheduled to accommodate the needs of students who work. The national media clearly need to devote more attention to community colleges.

National News Coverage by Level of School (Jan-Sept., 2009)	Percent of Education Stories
pre-schools	2.2
elementary schools	12.3
middle schools	10.7
high schools	20.1
community colleges	2.9
Colleges	12.5
Universities	14.5
no specific level mentioned	24.7
<i>Number of Stories</i>	551

Source: Project for Excellence in Journalism National Media Analysis, Jan-Sept., 2009

Heavy Emphasis This Year on School Finances, Politics, and H1N1 Flu Virus

In national stories that dealt specifically with education in 2009, there was a heavy emphasis on school finances, politics, and the H1N1 flu virus. Not surprisingly in light of state and local budget cutbacks brought on by the declining economy, school finances and the economic stimulus package garnered the most frequent

⁴ http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d08/tables/dt08_186.asp?referrer=report

coverage. Together, they comprised 17 percent of all education stories.

Other topics receiving considerable coverage included politics in education and the H1N1 flu virus. The politics category (7.4 percent of all education stories) included articles about whether schools were too “liberal” or whether Obama was trying to “indoctrinate” students with his Fall 2009 education speech.

The H1N1 flu virus generated considerable coverage after a number of schools reported flu epidemics. As parents grew concerned about the health of their children and what schools were doing, reporters wrote or broadcast a number of features on the virus. Stories included reports on flu outbreaks, the availability or unavailability of vaccines, and ways to promote good health.

There was little emphasis in national news reporting on education policy, curricular issues, teacher training, or school reform. Education reform generated 4.7 percent of the national stories on education, compared to 3.4 percent for curricular matters, 1.6 percent for education research, 1.3 percent for technology in schools, and 0.5 percent for teaching training.

The inattention to teaching is problematic in light of studies pointing to the importance of teacher quality to student learning. The same is true of stories about education research. Researchers have produced an extensive body of work assessing curricular reforms, new teaching techniques, and innovative ideas on learning. Very little of this research gets covered by the national media.

Education topic across all levels	Percent of stories
school finance/budget cutbacks	11.1
politics in education	7.4
H1N1 flu or health	7.3
economic stimulus package	6.4
Other	5.6
education reform (general)	4.7
student financial aid	4.5
strip searches/privacy issues	3.8
human interest story	3.8
curricular reform	3.4
school testing or testing results	3.3
Tuition	3.3
positive education messages	2.7
Admissions	2.5
career prospects	2.2
Special needs students	2.2
teacher pay/teacher shortages	2.2
dropout rates/graduation rates	2.0
reports on education research	1.6
Athletics	1.6
Diversity/minorities in schools	1.5

Education topic across all levels (con't)	Percent of stories
international education	1.5
charter schools	1.3
technology in schools/online learning	1.3
food/food preparation	1.1
Immigration	1.1
union contracts or strikes	0.9
adult education	0.9
profile of school administrators	0.9
crime at school	0.7
school-community relations	0.7
sexual activity	0.7
suspensions/disciplinary actions	0.7
parties/drug and alcohol use	0.7
clerical error/vacation days	0.7
school prayer or religion	0.5
teacher training	0.5
Hugging	0.5
Vouchers	0.4
sex education	0.4
creationism vs. evolution	0.4
Bullying	0.4
Abortion	0.2
Truancy	0.2
home schooling	0.2
<i>Number of Stories</i>	<i>551</i>

Source: Project for Excellence in Journalism National Media Analysis, Jan-Sept., 2009

Financing Problems for Higher Education, While Privacy Concerns Dominate Middle Schools

There were interesting differences in topical coverage by level of school. For higher education, budget problems and the economic stimulus package were the most frequent objects of news coverage. Nearly 19 percent of the community college coverage and 16 percent of university reporting centered on school finances and budget cuts. Another 19 percent of two-year institution reporting focused on the economic stimulus package. We should keep in mind, though, that there were only 16 stories regarding community colleges (and 12 about pre-schools) so 19 percent means only three stories. Given the low numbers, those percentages need to be interpreted carefully. For pre-schools and community colleges, having an additional story would increase the percentage substantially due to the small Ns.

Budget issues were paramount in the coverage of pre-school programs.

Financial problems earned 25 percent of the coverage here, while another 25 percent focused on the economic stimulus package, and 8.3 percent emphasized admission and tuition issues.

The difficulties students encountered in gaining admission to and paying for college were a major object of higher education coverage. These topics garnered 12.5 percent of the coverage for community colleges, 47.8 percent for colleges, and 21.3 percent for universities. Overall, admissions and financial aid issues generated 32 percent of the higher education coverage.

Meanwhile, coverage of issues related to privacy dominated coverage of middle schools. Fully 35.6 percent of all the articles about intermediate schools were based on the controversy over student strip searches. A Supreme Court case in April, 2009 involving a young girl who was strip searched in middle school accounted for the bulk of these stories about personal privacy. Again, this indicates how little education coverage relates to education itself, but rather focuses on subjects only tangentially related to teaching and learning.

2009 Topics (% of stories)	Pre-School	Elem	Middle	High School	Comm. College	College	University
school finance/budget cutbacks	25.0	7.4	3.4	10.8	18.8	8.7	16.3
sex education	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.3
creationism vs. evolution	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.9	0.0	0.0	0.0
school prayer or religion	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.3
Abortion	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.3
strip searches/privacy issues	0.0	0.0	35.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
reports on education research	8.3	0.0	1.7	1.8	0.0	0.0	1.3
school testing or testing results	0.0	7.4	6.8	5.4	0.0	1.4	0.0
curricular reform	0.0	7.4	6.8	4.5	6.3	1.4	1.3
food/food preparation	0.0	2.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.4	1.3
Athletics	0.0	0.0	1.7	4.5	0.0	1.4	2.5
school-community relations	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.9	0.0	0.0	1.3
career prospects	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.7	6.3	7.2	3.8
H1N1 flu or health	0.0	7.4	5.1	6.3	6.3	4.3	10.0
economic stimulus package	25.0	8.8	3.4	6.3	18.8	1.4	2.5
Special needs students	8.3	4.4	3.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
sexual activity	0.0	0.0	1.7	0.9	0.0	0.0	2.5
positive education messages	0.0	2.9	3.4	4.5	0.0	0.0	1.3
technology in schools/online learning	0.0	1.5	0.0	0.9	0.0	2.9	2.5
suspensions/disciplinary actions	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.8	0.0	0.0	2.5
Politics in education	0.0	8.8	1.7	2.7	0.0	4.3	7.5
parties/drug and alcohol use	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.9	2.5
education reform (general)	8.3	8.8	3.4	2.7	6.3	1.4	0.0
Hugging	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.7	0.0	0.0	0.0
clerical error/vacation days	0.0	4.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0

2009 Topics (% of stories) con't	Pre-School	Elem	Middle	High School	Comm. College	College	University
Human interest story	8.3	7.4	6.8	8.1	0.0	1.4	0.0
international education	0.0	2.9	0.0	1.8	0.0	1.4	3.8
Other	0.0	4.4	6.8	5.4	6.3	2.9	7.5
teachers/administrators	0.0	5.9	1.7	5.4	6.3	0.0	0.0
minorities/immigration	8.3	2.9	1.7	4.5	0.0	1.4	2.5
admissions/tuition/aid	8.3	0.0	0.0	2.7	12.5	47.8	21.3
Crime/bullying	0.0	1.5	1.7	3.6	0.0	0.0	0.0
dropout rates/truancy	0.0	1.5	0.0	5.4	0.0	5.8	1.3
non-traditional schools/education	0.0	1.5	3.4	2.7	12.5	0.0	1.3
<i>Number of Stories</i>	12	68	59	111	16	69	80

Source: *Project for Excellence in Journalism National Media Analysis, Jan-Sept., 2009*

News Organizations' Web Sites Are More Substantive in Covering Education Reform Than Print or Broadcast Reporting by the Very Same News Organizations

There were important differences among media organizations as to what got covered in 2009. *Online outlets were the most substantive of media outlets in their attention to education reform.* Web sites run by CNN.com, Yahoo News, MSNBC.com, Google News, AOL News, Foxnews.com, USAToday.com, Washingtonpost.com, ABCNews.com, BBC News (international version), Reuters.com, and NYTimes.com featured reform coverage that was double (12.8 percent) the amount offered on cable television (6.6 percent), and much higher than the reporting undertaken by network TV (4.3 percent), newspapers (3.6 percent), or radio (2.6 percent). Indeed, online coverage often was more substantive than reporting from the print or broadcast versions of *the very same news organizations*. This suggests that space limitations in print editions are placing ceilings on education coverage. Such space limitations do not apply on the web. At the least, media outlets should call attention in their traditional offerings to the more extensive coverage of education available online.

Newspapers (19.4 percent) were much more likely than online web sites (2.1 percent), network television (3.4 percent), cable television (7.9 percent), or radio (10.3 percent) to focus on school financing difficulties. Cable TV was more likely to focus on the politics of education, though this large reflects cable television's near obsession with the controversy over President Obama's speech to students at the beginning of the school year and the charges of some conservatives that it had political motives.

Network TV devoted the largest number of stories to health issues such as the H1N1 flu virus (18.1 percent of all stories). This was greater than online sources (6.4 percent), radio (6.0 percent), newspapers (4.1 percent), or cable TV (1.3 percent).

Invisible: 1.4 Percent Coverage for Education News is Not Enough

2009 Topic (% of stories)	Newspapers	Online	Network TV	Cable TV	Radio
school finance/budget cutbacks	19.4	2.1	3.4	7.9	10.3
Vouchers	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.3	0.9
Charter schools	2.6	0.0	1.7	0.0	0.0
sex education	0.5	2.1	0.0	0.0	0.0
creationism vs. evolution	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
school prayer or religion	0.0	2.1	0.9	1.3	0.0
Abortion	0.0	2.1	0.0	0.0	0.0
strip searches/privacy issues	2.0	6.4	7.8	1.3	3.4
crime at school	0.0	0.0	0.9	2.6	0.9
Reports on education research	1.5	0.0	1.7	1.3	2.6
school testing or testing results	6.6	2.1	0.9	1.3	1.7
diversity/minorities in schools	0.5	4.3	0.9	0.0	3.4
curricular reform	5.6	0.0	5.2	0.0	1.7
Teacher training	0.5	0.0	0.0	1.3	0.9
Union contracts or strikes	1.0	2.1	0.0	1.3	0.9
dropout rates/graduation rates	1.5	2.1	1.7	1.3	3.4
Truancy	0.0	0.0	0.9	0.0	0.0
food/food preparation	2.6	2.1	0.0	0.0	0.0
Athletics	1.5	2.1	0.9	0.0	3.4
school-community relations	0.0	0.0	3.4	0.0	0.0
Tuition	5.1	0.0	3.4	1.3	2.6
Student financial aid	5.1	4.3	0.9	7.9	5.2
career prospects	1.0	2.1	2.6	2.6	3.4
H1N1 flu or health	4.1	6.4	18.1	1.3	6.0
economic stimulus package	7.7	0.0	6.9	5.3	6.9
Special needs students	0.5	0.0	2.6	9.2	0.9
sexual activity	0.5	0.0	0.0	1.3	1.7
positive education messages	1.0	6.4	6.0	1.3	1.7
technology in schools/online learning	1.0	0.0	0.9	0.0	3.4
Immigration	2.0	0.0	0.0	2.6	0.0
Admissions	4.6	4.3	0.9	0.0	1.7
suspensions/disciplinary actions	0.5	2.1	0.0	0.0	1.7
home schooling	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.9
adult education	1.0	0.0	0.9	2.6	0.0
Teacher pay/teacher shortages	1.0	0.0	2.6	1.3	5.2
Politics in education	0.0	8.5	3.4	28.9	9.5
parties/drug and alcohol use	0.5	2.1	0.0	0.0	1.7
education reform (general)	3.6	12.8	4.3	6.6	2.6
profile of school administrators	2.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Hugging	0.5	2.1	0.9	0.0	0.0
clerical error/vacation days	0.0	0.0	0.9	1.3	1.7
Bullying	0.0	0.0	0.9	0.0	0.9
Human interest story	2.0	4.3	8.6	2.6	2.6
international education	2.6	2.1	0.0	1.3	0.9
Other	6.1	12.8	5.2	1.3	5.2
<i>Number of Stories</i>	196	47	116	76	116

Source: Project for Excellence in Journalism National Media Analysis, Jan-Sept., 2009

Politics, Crime, and Finances Dominate Associated Press Wire Stories

Since the Associated Press is the leading purveyor of wire stories to newspaper and broadcast stations, and also to many online outlets, our Brookings staff analyzed all the education stories that ran on the AP between January through September, 2009. Overall, we identified 691 education articles and analyzed their content.

The largest categories of coverage concerned politics in education (19.5 percent), crime in school (13.7 percent), international education (12.7 percent), school finance problems (11.1 percent), scandals (10.6 percent), athletics (8.4 percent), the H1N1 flu virus (8.1 percent), and tuition (8.1 percent). The findings of the analysis of AP's coverage paralleled those of our study of other national news outlets: once again, there was little attention paid to education policy or school reform issues.

AP Education topics	Percent of Stories
school finance/budget cutbacks	11.1
Politics in education	19.5
H1N1 flu or health	8.1
economic stimulus package	4.6
Other	0.3
education reform (general)	3.3
student financial aid	0.0
strip searches/privacy issues	0.0
human interest story	0.0
curricular reform	2.4
school testing or testing results	0.2
Tuition	8.1
positive education messages	0.0
Admissions	0.0
career prospects	0.0
Special needs students	0.0
teacher pay/teacher shortages	1.7
dropout rates/graduation rates	0.0
reports on education research	0.0
Athletics	8.4
Diversity/minorities in schools	2.2
international education	12.7
charter schools	1.2
technology in schools/online learning	0.0
food/food preparation	0.1
Immigration	0.7
union contracts or strikes	0.0
adult education	0.0
profile of school administrators	1.7

Invisible: 1.4 Percent Coverage for Education News is Not Enough

AP Education topics (con't)	Percent of Stories
crime at school	13.7
Scandals	10.6
Accidents	6.6
school-community relations	0.0
sexual activity	1.0
Suspensions/disciplinary actions	0.0
parties/drug and alcohol use	0.0
clerical error/vacation days	0.0
school prayer or religion	2.6
teacher training	0.0
Hugging	0.0
Vouchers	0.0
sex education	0.0
creationism vs. evolution	0.0
Bullying	0.0
Abortion	0.0
Truancy	0.0
home schooling	0.0
<i>Number of Stories</i>	691

Brookings Analysis of AP Wire Stories, Jan-Sept., 2009

Indeed, a striking feature of wire service education coverage is *how much of it focuses on stories that have nothing to do with education itself*. For example, a review of AP wire stories over the past summer reveals the following crime or accident headlines: “Explosion, no injuries at California high school” (August 24, 2009), “Several students injured in Neb. school bus crash” (August 24, 2009), “2nd lawsuit filed in Conn. Prep school sex scandal” (August 20, 2009), “Prosecutors” CA man admits blackmailing teacher” (August 18, 2009), “Conn. Prep school dean accused of molesting pupils” (August 13, 2009), and “Charges dropped in Conn. Teacher garbage case” (August 5).

Of the occasional headlines focusing on school performance, a number related to annual test score releases. An interesting side effect of increased attention to accountability standards is how reports of test scores regularly generate coverage. The annual release of local school performance data leads to stories. However, the focus on test scores is seldom extended to the policies and practices that underlie differences in scores. Why is it that some schools are doing a better job than others? Why do costs differ so much among schools with the same levels of performance? Do schools with similar levels of measured student achievement differ in terms of the other indicators of student outcomes such as on-time graduation or college attendance?

In most of the accounts, these questions – critical to policy-making in education – are asked rarely, if at all. As a result, connections between school performance

Invisible: 1.4 Percent Coverage for Education News is Not Enough

and curricular or teaching innovations are rarely made, depriving readers of potentially valuable information. Stories about crime, scandals, lawsuits, accidents, and flu epidemics may be of interest to readers, but they have nothing to do with education as such.

Blogs and Citizen Journalism Provide Useful In-Depth Coverage

In recent years, new media outlets such as Internet sites, blogs, and citizen journalism have appeared that supplement the work of traditional news outlets. For example, EdNews.org represents a leading source of online news about elementary, secondary, and post-secondary issues. It reports that it reaches 3 million unique monthly readers. A perusal of its headlines reveals the stories cover the range from education to social and political issues: “Teenage Pregnancies Go UP;” “One Million Pupils Denied School Meals;” “Obama to Name Duncan Education Secretary;” “City Schools Pack ‘Em Increasing Class Size;” and “Higher Ed Leaders Press for Chunk of Stimulus.” Their coverage reflects the site’s central purpose as a news aggregator: to compile newspaper stories from around the country, synthesizing existing coverage more than providing original content.

Bloggers provide their own content, but in a form that unique to the person(s) who writes the postings. It is estimated that there are more than 5,000 education blogs in the United States. The blogs cover a wide range of topics. Richard Lee Colvin of the Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media has a weblog outlining his views regarding problems of press coverage of education. Education Next has a blog featuring a number of education thinkers. Blogs advertising the “latest news in the world of education” include Eduwonk and This Week in Education. Activists seeking to reform schools have created such blogs as Change Agency, D-Ed Reckoning, Education Intelligence Agency, Practical Theory, and Schools Matter. There are blogs that focus on learning, such as 2 Cents Worth, Informal learning blog, and a Random Walk in Learning. Research-based blogs include Free Range Librarian, Research Buzz, Deep Thinking, and Dissertation Research. Teaching is the focus of Are We Doing Anything Today?, Bud the Teacher, NYC Educator, and Teachers Teaching Teachers. And instructional technology represents the focus of Bionic Teaching, Ed-Tech Insider, and EdTechPost.

One of the more prominent blogs is Eduwonk (found at <http://www.eduwonk.com/>), written by Andy Rotherham, the co-founder and Publisher of Education Sector, an independent think tank that studies education policy. Rotherham is the main writer, but guest bloggers also contribute posts. In this case study, we looked at the Eduwonk’s blog posts for the month of September, and counted 58 posts (excluding a few personal posts.)

Most Eduwonk posts were short in length, and often had the character of announcements. Rotherham’s posts direct readers to take a look at stories that he

believes are “must-reads” – for example, a September 19 McClatchy story (“Teachers find Obama not the friend they had expected”) and a September 12 article by Alan Borsuk in the Milwaukee’s Journal Sentinel on mayoral control and performance pay (“Hot topics show party’s division”). As is appropriate for a blogger, he calls out and criticizes individuals and policies he finds wanting. In a September 1 post (“It’s all about the kids”), he links to a story which quotes Metro Association of Classroom Educators chairman John Trotter blaming children in failing schools as the main problem, and calling them “unmotivated and lazy.”

In a September 3, 2009 post, “[Speaking Parenthetically Of Charters](#),” Rotherham discusses a recently published study about charter schools in New York. While crediting the study being “clever,” he adds that “the finding is somewhat unsurprising.” Looking at the issue of charter schools more broadly, he expresses his frustration about the quality of the charter school debate in general:

What’s amazing though is how much of the debate about the study and charters overall right now is still tactical (charters good, charters bad, anecdotes tossed around) rather than strategic (knowing what we know about charters, good and bad, what are the implications if we’re serious about really trying to move outcomes in part through a new school development strategy?).

Rotherham believes that fighting over issues of this sort only delays what he sees as the real work of education reform.

Rotherham comments on a range of social, cultural, and political issues related to education. In “Everybody Must Get Stone(d)!” He argues that established interests in education would gain more by learning from what is working in leading programs such as Teach for America and KIPP, rather than trying to “tear them down.” He dismissed the controversy over President Obama’s address to school children as a “political circus.”

Another prominent outlet with blogs (13 in all) is Education Week at <http://www.edweek.org/ew/section/blogs/index.html>. Their blogs address specific topics in education, such as legal developments affecting schools, integrating technology into the classroom, and special education issues. The Education Week website also has 5 other blogs featured by *Teacher Magazine*. We looked specifically at the “**Politics K-12**” blog for the month of September 2009, and counted 27 posts total. In this blog, Michele McNeil and Alyson Klein “provide regular coverage of political developments that affect education at the federal and state level.” Both reporters had previous experience covering state and federal education policy. McNeil joined *Education Week* as a state policy reporter in 2006, after ten years covering education and state government. Klein covers federal education policy, and she spent almost two years at *Congress Daily* before joining *Education Week* in 2006. McNeil and Klein write the majority of the posts, but guest bloggers contribute as well. The posts are fairly substantive and longer in length (with the exception of updates to stories). They read like newspaper articles, but

include personal views as well.

In a September 24, 2009 post “Department Kicks Off NCLB Discussion at Packed Forum” Klein writes about a public forum that Secretary of Education Arne Duncan hosted with two assistant secretaries – Carmel Martin and Thelma Melendez – to hear feedback on reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act. In a post from the day prior, Klein had written:

As a reporter, I have to give the department a tip of the hat for making this meeting public and open to the press. Of course, I have no idea what is going on behind closed doors; this could just be the show-and-tell version. But still, it seems to be a step toward the department’s promised transparency.

In a September 4, 2009 post, McNeil points out that Alaska, Louisiana, New Hampshire, and New Mexico have not used any of the funding that state stimulus grants had given them for education. She notes that even South Carolina has spent some of its share, despite the Governor’s efforts to turn down stimulus funding.

In addition to covering education specific issues (such as legislation, funding, and Department of Education announcements), McNeil and Klein also write about non-education issues that have an indirect impact on education. In a September 18 post, “Some Education Groups Less Happy With New Health Care Bill,” Klein writes of the National Education Association’s unhappiness over certain aspects of the Senate Finance Committee’s proposal. Every Friday, they post a “Friday Reading List,” which provides a short list of 5-10 articles from other media sites that they recommend reading. They also highlight upcoming events of note.

Citizen-initiated journalism – whether on blogs, YouTube videos, Facebook postings, I-comments, and the like – is most helpful in coverage of breaking news. When there is a school shooting or some other dramatic news event, citizen reports have an immediacy and authenticity that readers like. Since news organizations are strapped for funds, they often have closed bureaus or reduced staffs, so it is difficult to respond quickly to breaking news. For example, after the Virginia Tech shootings, CNN and other news organizations used its I-comments feature to publish student pictures, video, and news reports. This provided instantaneous reporting in the period before news reporters arrived at the scene and before official briefings had been organized.

But such approaches are not a substitute for continuous beat reporting. Nor can citizen journalists engage in investigative journalism – though they can expose issues that should be the subject of more extensive treatment. Blogs do offer in-depth research and coverage about education (and many blogs give working journalists alternative outlets for substantive coverage that is not included as part of a media outlet’s regular news reporting). But many of the blogs have limited readership, limiting their impact. News outlets should consider adding high quality education blogs to their websites. These could usefully supplement their own blogging efforts and fill a void in policy coverage left by staff cutbacks on

education beats.

Local News Coverage Is More Detailed and Substantive Than National Reporting

To supplement our analysis of national education coverage, we undertook a series of case studies of reporting in four communities across America: Phoenix, Arizona; Providence, Rhode Island; Des Moines, Iowa; and Minneapolis, Minnesota. For each, we reviewed newspaper coverage, focusing on content, scope, and new innovations in reporting such as blogs or talkback features.

We found significant differences in how local and national outlets reported on education. We also found differences across the four communities themselves. *In general, local papers appear to be more substantive and to devote greater attention to education policy and school reform than do national news organizations.* Local education writers tend to focus less on crime stories or episodic coverage. Three of the four newspapers had blogs and provided interactive devices for reader commentary.

Providence, Rhode Island

The Providence Journal has an education section with its own drop-down tab under the “news” drop down menu of the website. A number of reporters contributed to this education section, two of whom have education as their primary focus. We kept track of education articles from July 18, 2009 to September 30, 2009, and counted a total of 103 articles during this three and one-half month period.

Of these 103 articles, 22 (or 21 percent of the total) related to higher education, reflecting the importance of institutions of higher learning in the Journal’s circulation area. The paper gave substantial institutional coverage to its universities. Two articles, for example, focused on discussions between college presidents and students and staff on administrative and educational issues (“In online chat, new URI president lays out his plans” and “RISD president tries to clear the air on changes”). Other articles focused on grants and funding for schools, both federal and corporate (“CVS pledges \$2 million for URI Pharmacy Building” and “CCRI positioned to tap into \$12-billion federal initiative”). A focus on budgetary, staffing, and administrative issues also played an important role in stories about K-12 education.

Seven stories (or 6.7 percent of the total) focused on new kinds of schools that have been created (“In Central Falls, a new charter school opens early with new approach), or schools that have undergone change (“A second life for Nathan Bishop Middle School”). This was considerably higher than the 1.3 percent share of coverage for charter schools by the national news media, and the 1.2 percent in AP wire stories. In “A first step toward college,” staff writer Jennifer Jordan wrote about the first day of school at Democracy Prep Blackstone Valley, a new kind of regional public school in the state – a mayoral academy. Jordan explained how the mayoral academy differed from other public schools and described the goals of the school, how it is funded while offering background on the expectations of its

teachers. She included quotations from several levels of staff, including teachers, the principal, and the superintendent.

The state's new pre-K program received several news stories. An August 22 article, "Free pre-school programs available in four cities" informed parents about the qualifications necessary to enroll their children at one of the free early education programs. It also gave them information on how to apply and contact information for the schools.

In general, there were few news stories about sports or crime-related activity. There was also little coverage about President Obama, other than his back-to-school speech to school children. Policy and substance generated more coverage than scandals or episodic reporting.

The Providence Journal has an online education blog called "EdWatch" written by Julia Steiny, a former member of the Providence School Board. She posts a few times each week, and her blogs appear as stories in the education section of the website.

Des Moines, Iowa

The Des Moines Register education section is found under the "news" tab of the website. We looked at education articles between July 24 - July 30, 2009 and September 23 - September 30, 2009. For the week in July, we counted 11 stories, and for the week in September, we counted 21 stories.

As in the other newspapers, we saw local districts considering charter schools as an alternative to public schools. In "Des Moines takes first step with meetings to discuss creating charter school," Melissa Walker wrote about how Des Moines school officials would begin presenting preliminary plans for a new charter school at a series of public forums. She spoke with an education consultant who was a former alternative high school principal, and the district Superintendent for the story. The article concluded with more information about the dates and location of coming public forums on the topic.

Local school board elections received substantial coverage, including reminders about deadlines to submit candidacy papers ("Deadline near for Des Moines school board candidacy") or more in-depth stories about the school board itself. In "3 takers for 4 slots on Des Moines school board," Walker spoke to the County auditor and commission of elections, former school board members and candidates, and the executive director of the urban Education Network of Iowa, about the dynamics of the local race. She also described the issues the new school board members would face.

In general, there were several short articles that either announced or covered local events ("Renovated King Academy to hold open house" and "Strike up the band, it's homecoming in Urbandale), and also more in-depth articles about challenges and successes in the area. In a September 27 article, "No exception for economic hardship in transfer rule," Stacy Hupp discussed rules for athletes who

change schools. In “Program gets dropouts to re-enroll in school,” Cynthia Reynaud wrote about the successful efforts of a new outreach program led by Des Moines Public Schools and United Way of Central Iowa. Called “Reach Out to Dropouts”, it discussed the 140 drop-outs who re-enrolled for the new school year.

On August 31, 2009, the Des Moines Register website launched an education blog with two staff reporters. In the introductory blog post, Melissa Walker explained that she would “write about various educational issues but mostly about what is going on in the Des Moines school district.” She has posted some in-depth pieces about the recent school board elections, with forum transcripts, and voter guides for readers. Walker is an education reporter who has been with the Des Moines Register for six years. She primarily covers the Des Moines school district, but also statewide K-12 issues. Staci Hupp the other blog writer, covers K-12 schools, community colleges, and the Iowa Board of Regents. From the blog’s launch on August 31 to September 30, 2009, we counted 28 blog posts, an impressive burst of activity for the new feature.

Minneapolis, Minnesota

The Minneapolis Star Tribune does not have an education specific section under the “news” tab of its website, but instead disperses education stories under “local news” across the four metro areas. Emily Johns is the main education reporter, though other staff writers follow this area as well. According to the newspaper website, Johns covers schools in Minneapolis and “education accountability issues”, and has covered education since 2005.

We kept track of education articles from May 20, 2009 to September 23, 2009, and counted a total of 39 articles. The many education problems confronting Minnesota were brought to light by eight articles concerning school restructuring (“Mpls. schools mull restructuring plan”), proposed schools closings (“Doors close on 4 Minneapolis schools”), or teacher layoffs (“Facing deficit, St. Paul schools cut 143 teachers”). Still other stories reflected the complicated politics of such decisions (“Fed up with critics of public education” and “Proposed school closings criticized”).

Five articles addressed the poor test results and low student proficiency in math, science, and reading. In “More Minnesota schools fall behind in math, reading,” Johns and other staff writers reported that more than half of Minnesota’s school would be “falling behind” according to No Child Left Behind standards. It noted that students had made gains, but that these had not been substantial enough to escape this category. For this piece, writers interviewed superintendents, principals, and representatives of education groups such as the Minnesota Association of School Administrators, and the Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota.

School quality represented a major concern for area parents. In “For parents, school quality is the worry,” Johns wrote about a community meeting where 250 parents voiced concerns that their children would lose access to quality education,

should the school board move forward with downsizing plans. Johns spoke to parents of children from kindergarten up to high school. The article concluded with information about future meeting dates.

The increasing number of immigrant children who are students in U.S. schools was the topic of a few stories centering on challenges for local school districts. In a June 26 article, “Latino parents make a pitch,” Johns described a controversy Latino parents, and the school district. The district had planned to phase out a program for Spanish-speaking students at a local school. A Latino parent told Johns through a translator that if the district ended the Spanish-speaking program, some Latino children would likely have to leave the district.

Several stories highlighted citizen reaction to poor school performance, including a story entitled “Nearly half of state’s schools failed to meet goals” and another, “Minneapolis board to discuss ‘self-governed’ schools.” Johns noted that “self-governed” schools feature innovations similar to those of charter schools, but without depriving school districts of per-pupil revenue. The story “What if teachers ran Minnesota’s school?” further explores the options of such schools.

The articles reported in the paper generally had a K-12 focus. There were no articles about higher education or early childhood education. And unlike the other local papers reviewed, the Minneapolis Star Tribune did not have an online education blog. It has not incorporated as many interactive features on its website in the area of education as the other papers we examined, although its overall coverage was highly substantive.

Phoenix, Arizona

The Arizona Republic made changes in its education coverage during the period of our study. At the outset of our analysis, the paper had a general education news section online, one main education blog, and three other blogs as well. In August, however, it began aggregating all of its education news coverage into a single new blog called “School Grounds.” The paper had a team of K-12 and community education reporters who updated their blog at least twice a day.

The introductory blog post of August 14, 2009 outlined the blog’s overall goal, what kinds of stories would be covered, and who would be writing them. The post summed up the blog’s goal as: “keeping parents, taxpayers, residents and students informed on K-12 education issues in the Valley, around Arizona, and across the nation.” The blog planned to address an array of topics, including:

...what’s going on in and outside the classroom, what’s happening at local school district governing board meetings, what’s being discussed in the Arizona Department of Education, and what decisions are coming down from any and every public body affecting state education, like the Arizona State Legislature, the Arizona Attorney General, the Arizona Governor’s Officer, and the Arizona Supreme Court.

Not counting the first post announcing the new blog, from August 15 – September 30, 2009, there were 64 education stories in “School Grounds.” It included two articles (three percent of the total) that related to higher-education (“Degree or Not Degree: That is the Question” and “Colleges focus on math, science teacher training.”). It is worth noting, however, that these stories were not so much about college as they were about the benefits of continued or higher education for K-12 teachers in the classroom.

True to its goals, “School Grounds” covered a wide range of education topics in the elementary and secondary area. These included curriculum (“More civics education needed in schools, study says”); charter and magnet schools (“Will Mesa’s newest charter live up to its promise?” and “Magnets offers parents choice, students opportunities”); education reform (“Education reform gets \$900,000 boost” and “Reform on the way.”); teacher quality (“Good teachers provide higher standard, study shows”), and teacher retention (“Mentorship may not boost teacher retention”). In addition to offering original content, staff writers also wrote about studies and polls with results that would be of interest and relevance to Arizona (“News study on Latina dropout prevention” and “Poll: most residents thinks Arizona’s education system is broken”) and how schools were faring amidst the year’s budget and funding challenges.

Five stories reflected the growing use of new technologies and social media in the classroom. In “Valley school districts join Twitter world,” Sherry Anne Rubiano discussed how the technology was used in the Dysart Unified School District. In “Schools use social media to spotlight successes,” Lori Baker interviewed the executive director of the Arizona School Boards Association about its new Twitter and Facebook pages.

Ten stories discussed state and national politicians who were either talking to educators, or proposing initiatives related to education (“Congressman seeks tracking of problem teachers” and “Feds asking for local educators help in reform”). In “Governors, school officials suggest uniform standards,” Emily Gersema wrote that the National Governors Association, working with the Council of Chief State School Officers, had offered a uniform set of academic standards for K-12 education and college preparation.

Before August 14, the Arizona Republic had four education blogs on its website. Education editor Lori Baker blogged for the main offering, called “Chalk Talk.” The others were maintained by members of the community concerned with education. In addition to advice pieces (“Teaching kids about money” and “Making high school less intimidating for freshman”), Chalk Talk also served as an announcement board, informing readers about donation drives, scholarships, and various workshops.

Recommendations for Improving Education News Coverage

Education news coverage suffers from problems related both to quantity and to quality. Relative to the importance of education as a policy area, there is surprisingly – one might even say shockingly – little national coverage of education in the national media. Of the education news that is reported, little of it relates to school policies or to ways of improving the curriculum and process of learning. There was hardly any coverage of school reform, teacher quality, or other matters thought to be crucial for educational attainment. Instead, most stories on the schools focused on general reports about finances and budget problems or to episodes; crime, scandals, the H1N1 flu, or President Obama’s address to school children.

On the other hand, the local newspapers and some of the new digital blogs and news outlets were far more substantive in their coverage. We suspect this related to a shrewd judgment by publishers and editors that local citizens, especially parents, rely on their local media for information on a vital local institution. We even discerned a possible trend, highlighted by the case of the Arizona Republic, of expanding local coverage of education. This reflects, we believe, not only a healthy concern for the public interest on the part of editors, but also a wise business decision: Local readers count on their newspapers to keep them informed about institutions that have a great impact on their own lives and their region’s prosperity. They also count on the media to hold such institutions accountable – or, at least, harbor the hope that they will. And parents are not content with coverage focused only on hot button questions or episodes. They are vitally concerned with what their children are learning and how they are advancing. We believe that nationally-oriented media outlets have a great deal to learn from how local reporters cover education.

At the same time, we worry that the financial situation of the news industry could force continued cutbacks in the education beat, at the local as well as the national level. It will take a concerted effort on the part of news organizations, education administrators, government leaders, school boards, parents, students, and community leaders to reverse the trends weakening education coverage. As we have already noted, schools need to understand that communicating with citizens, and not just their own students, is a vital part of their education. Time spent informing reporters, parents, and the community about what is happening inside schools is a good investment in public understanding. This means accepting that communication with reporters involves a mix of cooperative and adversarial moments. More informed coverage will not always be “positive” coverage, yet increased public understanding of the issues surrounding education is essential to improving schools and universities.

Young people can be a valuable part of this communications effort through student newspapers, social media, citizen journalism, and other outreach activities. Students have an understanding of new technologies that often exceeds that of

school administrators or parents. They should use information technology to communicate what is happening in their schools. In an era of citizen journalism and grass-roots communications, they can be powerful agents of public information and reform. Young people have credibility in talking about schools and should take advantage of the fact that contemporary communications are as much “bottom-up” as “top-down”.

Government officials should do more than they are doing to draw attention to education policy through events, forums, and speeches that command attention of reporters, editors and producers who face an expanding news hole, especially in regard to community colleges. Reporters need to think about new ways of covering education, and the innovative use of blogs and websites is promising.

Education reporters should consider innovations in the health care area. Journalists who follow medicine and health often highlight new studies, clinical trials, or other evaluative research that help consumers understand experimental treatments, drugs, and medical therapies. There should be better use of education research that evaluates school reforms, teacher quality, and classroom practices. Universities, think tanks, and non-profit organizations produce high quality research, yet little of this work can inform policymakers or the general public if the media do not cover it.

The most noteworthy feature of the current period is the development of digital technology. Media publishers and editors should find ways to integrate quality education blogs and other forms of citizen journalism into press coverage. This could take the form of newspapers developing their own blogs and community talkbacks or providing links to education policy blogs that already exist. This could help fill the policy void left by staff cutbacks on education beats. Our findings on the expansion of online coverage of education are promising: The online sites of news outlets are not limited by the space available in a physical newspaper or the time constraints of a newscast. News outlets should encourage readers and viewers to turn to their more extensive web coverage of education.

Finally, foundations and non-profit organizations should focus on finding way to encourage not only investigative journalism centered on educational institutions but also more, continuing beat coverage. We would emphasize again that there is no substitute for day-to-day reporting on the schools. Reporters who parachute in to cover a particular school crisis are no substitute for journalists who immerse themselves both in the broader issues surrounding educational improvement and in the on-the-ground experiences of particular teachers and students and schools. We believe that partnerships between not-for-profit organizations and profit-making newspapers should be encouraged. More coverage of education is, we believe, in the financial interest of newspapers, particularly at the local level. But expanded, substantive coverage is decidedly in the public interest. Barriers that restrict such partnerships should be torn down, even as publishers, editors and producers search out partners in the non-profit sector who could help them beef up education coverage in economically challenging moments.

We would address a final word to those who oversee national media outlets: The pressures to cover hot-button issues and ideologically divisive questions are immense. News organizations are usually rewarded by interested readers when they cover celebrities or controversial personalities – witness the outpouring of coverage over the release of Sarah Palin’s book. We fully understand the financial pressures facing traditional news outlets.

But the paltry amount of space and time accorded to the core questions surrounding educational improvement is inimical to the public interest. We count on the media to bring critical issues to the attention of a free citizenry. We do not expect education stories to outnumber stories about wars, natural disasters, elections or crime. We do think that the media can do better than according a mere 1.4 percent of their output to the future of our children.

Governance Studies

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Appendix: Study Methodology

Our analysis of pre-kindergarten, elementary, and secondary education reporting is based on a variety of different data sources: national newspaper, television, and radio coverage; Associated Press wire stories, education blogs, and case studies of press coverage in four communities around America: Providence, Rhode Island; Phoenix, Arizona; Des Moines, Iowa; and Minneapolis, Minnesota. Jenny Lu and Anna Ulrich provided invaluable research assistance with the AP analysis, the study of education blogs, and local news coverage.

The data for the study of national education coverage was made up of coding from the Project for Excellence in Journalism's weekly News Coverage Index (NCI). We are grateful for the data analysis provided by Tom Rosenstiel and Paul Hitlin of PEJ. Their work included data from January 1 through September 30, 2009. PEJ data were tabulated from leading newspapers, morning television, nightly television news, leading cable TV shows, radio shows, top news websites, and talk radio outlets. The complete methodology of the News Coverage Index is available at www.journalism.org.

Additional coding was performed for education-focused stories. These included all stories in PEJ's News Coverage Index that were originally coded for education as either their "Big Story" or "Broad Story Topic." That resulted in 551 stories. The news outlets that were covered as part of PEJ's regular News Coverage Index included the following:

Newspapers Coded Every Day Sunday through Friday
New York Times

Coded two out of these four every weekday and Sunday
Washington Post, USA Today, Los Angeles Times, Wall Street Journal

Coded two out of these four every weekday and Sunday
Kansas City Star, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, San Antonio Express-News, San Jose Mercury News

Coded 2 out of these 4 every weekday and Sunday
Herald News (MA), Anniston Star (AL), Spokesman-Review (WA), Meadville Tribune (PA)

Web sites (Coded 6 of 12 each day, Mon-Fri)
CNN.com, Yahoo News, MSNBC.com, Google News, AOL News, Foxnews.com, USA Today.com, Washingtonpost.com, ABCNews.com, BBC News (international version), Reuters.com, NYTimes.com

Morning Network TV (Mon-Fri)

ABC - Good Morning America, CBS - Early Show, NBC - Today

Evening Network TV (Mon-Fri)

ABC - World News Tonight, CBS - CBS Evening News, NBC - NBC Nightly News,

PBS - NewsHour with Jim Lehrer (rotated daily between the first 30 minutes and the second 30 minutes of the hour-long broadcast)

Cable TV (Fifteen in all, Mon-Fri)

Daytime (2:00 to 2:30 pm) coded 2 out of 3 every day

CNN, Fox News, MSNBC

Nighttime CNN - coded 2 out of the 4 every day

Situation Room (6 pm), Lou Dobbs Tonight, CNN Prime Time/Campbell

Brown: No Bias, No Bull, Anderson Cooper 360

Nighttime Fox News - coded 2 out of the 4 every day

Special Report w/ Bret Baier, Fox Report w/ Shepard Smith, O'Reilly Factor, Hannity

Nighttime MSNBC - coded 2 out of the 4 every day

The Ed Show/1600 Pennsylvania Ave, Hardball (7 pm), Countdown w/ Keith Olbermann, Rachel Maddow

News Radio (Mon-Fri)

NPR Morning Edition every day (rotated daily between the first 30 minutes of the first hour and first 30 minutes of the second hour), ABC Radio headlines at 9am and 5pm,

CBS Radio headlines at 9am and 5pm

Talk Radio (Mon-Fri)

Rush Limbaugh every other day, 1 out of 2 additional conservatives each day (Sean Hannity, Michael Savage), 1 out of 2 liberals each day (Ed Schultz, Randi Rhodes, Stephanie Miller show was coded from March 2 to May 8 while Randi Rhodes was off the air

For the broad sample, PEJ analyzed all stories with a national or international focus that appeared as follows:

- On the front page of newspapers
- During the first 30 minutes of network morning news, cable programs, and talk radio shows
- During a thirty minute segment of NPR's Morning Edition and PBS' NewsHour with Jim Lehrer

- As one of the top 5 stories on each Web site at the time of capture
- During the entirety of the commercial network evening newscasts and syndicated news headlines segments on ABC radio and CBS radio

For newspapers that are available in print in the Washington, D.C. area, hard copies are used. For newspapers that are not available for delivery, digital editions of the paper are retrieved either through the newspaper's own Web site, or through the use of digital delivery services such as pressdisplay.com and newsstand.com. When necessary, the text of articles are supplemented by the archives available in the LexisNexis computer database.

Radio programs are captured through online streams of the shows. Using automated software, we record several local affiliates that air the program in various markets throughout the country. The purpose of this method is to ensure that we have a version of the program in case one of the streams is unavailable on a particular day, and so that we record the show in a manner that represents the way a typical listener would hear the program with commercials and newsbreaks.

Online websites are captured manually by a member of PEJ's staff. The capture time is rotated daily between 9-10 am ET and 4-5 pm ET. The home pages and pages with the top articles for all sites are saved so that when we reference the material, the format is the same as it appeared online at the time of capture.


Finally, all television shows are recorded digitally and archived for coding purposes. PEJ is a subscriber to DirectTV satellite service and all programs are recorded onto multiple TiVo recording units before being burned onto DVDs for archival purposes. All television and radio programs are then coded by a member of PEJ's staff who watches or listens to the archived version of the program.

The data derived from PEJ's regular Index coding was conducted by PEJ's team of 15 trained coders. We have tested all of the variables contained in the regular weekly Index coding and all the variables reached a level of agreement of 80% or higher. For specific information about those tests, see the [methodology section for the NCI](#).

For the stories from the economy-focused sample (551 stories), additional coding was conducted for two additional variables: level of school and education topic.

- **Level of school** refers to the level of school most addressed by the story
- **Education topic** designates the specific topic addressed by a story. The topic involves the issue or event being covered.

A team of four of PEJ's experienced coders worked with a coding administrator in



order to complete the additional coding for this particular study. In addition to the main intercoder testing conducted on all NCI variables, supplemental testing was conducted on the additional variables used in this portion of the study. Ten randomly selected stories were coded by all members of the coding team, and 15 other stories were coded by two members of the coding team, meaning that 25 total stories were part of the intercoder sample. The percent agreement for each variable was 94 percent for level of school and 90 percent for education topic.