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Media analysis

Shifts in News Coverage of Education Issues

News coverage of education issues has increased nearly six times in the last year alone as state implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has begun. A review and analysis of this coverage shows that reporting on education issues is not only increasing in quantity, but also in its sophistication and usefulness to readers.

Depth and detail increases

Reporters are becoming well-schooled in education issues, a fact reflected in the increasing depth and detail in news coverage. Terms once considered arcane, distant jargon are now a part of the daily reporting lexicon. For example, use of the term “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) — the measure by which schools are placed on the federal “needs improvement” list — increased 80 percent since last year. AYP is included on almost every state Department of Education’s glossary of terms and was a seminar topic included in a recent Hechinger Institute on Education & the Media newsletter and Education Writers Association conference.

“Failure” vs. “needs improvement”

Despite more nuanced labels used by states and the federal government’s “needs improvement” distinction, “failure” is the predominant term used in news coverage to describe the schools on the NCLB-mandated state lists.

Although the official Department of Education designation referred to them as “needs improvement” schools, the “needs improvement” label was only used 33 times, or about 10 percent of the time in news coverage. A Nexis search following the first state announcements of schools that did not make federally required progress in April 2003 found “failing” used 188 times, or 60 percent of the time. “Low-performing” was used 56 times (about 20 percent of the time) and “underperforming” 39 times in news coverage that spanned April 15, 2003, through July 17, 2003.

The gravitational pull toward the failing mantra appears intense. Consider this headline in a recent Oregon Associated Press story:

“Eight schools punished for failing No Child Left Behind” — the lead of the story declares, “Eight schools in Oregon have fallen prey to the No Child Left Behind Law....” (*Associated Press*, July 8, 2003)

In states that made a concerted effort to define terms early, such as Michigan and Minnesota,

coverage tended to incorporate more discriminating labels. In Michigan, the schools were termed “high priority” and in Minnesota they were designated as “needs improvement” schools.

A closer look at gaps in achievement

News coverage has been slow to pick up that AYP is based on disaggregated data — the performance of groups of students segmented by race, income level, special needs and English language learners. Most coverage refers simply to “a more strict or rigid accountability system.” However, in the last four months a Nexis search revealed a 300 percent increase in reporting how the achievement gaps affect AYP. For example, news coverage in Minnesota pointed to specific schools and districts that struggled with gaps in achievement among different groups of students. Perhaps most important, the news coverage reflected Minnesota’s plan for closing the gaps — intensive school staff training this summer.

Ohio has long made closing the achievement gap a central message and in a recent announcement recognized “Schools of Promise” — schools with a poverty level of 50 percent or higher and where at least 75 percent of the students have passed the math and/or reading portions of the proficiency tests. This initiative was picked up in most of the state’s major media outlets.

Similar stories in Chicago; Charlotte, NC; Detroit and several other cities show that coverage of achievement gaps among different groups of students is becoming much more frequent, detailed and useful.

“Highly qualified” teachers

With the new NCLB “highly qualified” teacher requirement kicking in, news coverage of teaching quality has spiked nearly 400 percent over this same period last year (April to July, 2002, produced 65 stories; 257 stories have emerged from April to July, 2003). The flurry of stories — most of them in the last month — was generated by states and school districts sending letters home to parents and a Department of Education report to Congress.

The “highly qualified” teacher issue in NCLB is generating some of the same stark pronouncements sparked by the “needs improvement” list announcements. Headlines accompanying a national AP story about the July 15 Department of Education report on teacher quality warned: “Half of teachers are not qualified under the new law.”

To date, most news coverage portrays the federal provision as an inflexible mandate blind to the unique needs of local districts. “Many teachers will no longer be able to teach,” implied about a third of the stories.

“ ‘Montana thinks I’m a qualified teacher, but the federal government doesn’t agree,’ declared a 25-year old social studies teacher from Winnett, where the ‘townspeople say he does a darn good job.’ ” (*New York Times*, June 23, 2003)

“ ‘This is just another example of how a good concept gets turned upside down by rules and bureaucracy,’ said New Jersey School Boards Association spokesman Mike Yaple.” (*Free Press of Atlantic City*, July 14, 2003)

As is the case in much of news coverage, the anomaly or exception to the rule captures media

attention:

“Take Jennifer Anderson. The Saddleback third-grade teacher has taught for 10 years and earned a master’s in education, but she wasn’t tested in her subjects. Anderson likely would not be considered highly qualified until she is evaluated. But three new teachers whom she mentored would make the grade.” (*Orange County Register*, July 21, 2003)

Coverage to date includes many quotes from insulted teachers of scoffing administrators:

“After 27 years of working as an elementary school instructional assistance, Sharon Fischer just got word that she is qualified to do her job. But she had to take a test to prove it. ‘It’s a slap in the face,’ said Fischer... .” (*Baltimore Sun*, July 14, 2003)

“ ‘Ironically, some of the best teachers I have had are out-of-field,’ said James Kidd, principal of South Tech High School in Boynton Beach. ‘They may have had no certification, but they could teach math to a rock.’ ” (*Palm Beach Post*, June 12, 2003)

Nearly all coverage mentioned the negative effect the new requirements would have on efforts to attract and retain good teachers. None mentioned what research says about teaching quality. To date, only one story in *USA Today* has mentioned what research shows about a teacher’s experience and qualifications effect on student achievement:

“[Research] suggests that teachers should have both a grasp of the subject and an understanding of pedagogy — how to teach. But that finding conflicts with Bush administration proposals, which have supported programs that downplay pedagogy and recruit teachers with strong subject-matter backgrounds.” (*USA Today*, July 16, 2003)

NEA lawsuit

News coverage of the National Education Association’s announcement to sue the federal government over unfunded mandates in the No Child Left Behind Act was fairly significant (a national Associated Press story and about 60-plus midsized and national newspaper stories), earning them a standing parenthetical in many subsequent news stories about NCLB:

“The NEA announced plans to sue the U.S. government for failing to provide adequate funding to schools to meet the new standards. They point to a provision in the law that states: ‘*Nothing in this Act shall be construed to authorize an ... employee of the federal Government to ... mandate a State or any subdivision thereof to spend any funds or incur any costs not paid for under this Act.*’” (Poynter Journalism Institute news synthesis, July 21, 2003)

As a lawsuit, there are built in “newsmaking” opportunities that are likely to grow out of these initial stories: the announcement of the intent to sue, the filing of the lawsuit, the response, and various other increments in the legal process. In addition, recent quotes from NEA President Reg Weaver evidence “fighting words” that will likely only escalate in the next months:

“The goal of the federal government’s No Child Left Behind Act is to label public schools a failure and to privatize education,” Reg Weaver, NEA President. (*Arizona Republic*, July 17, 2003)

Head Start and early childhood

Despite governors support for the administration’s proposed changes to Head Start, news coverage (particularly editorial positions) has focused almost exclusively on opposition to the proposal and concerns that it will lead to a degradation of service. While the proposal spawned more than 300 stories, very little attention has been given to the teacher certification and preparation measures included in the legislation. Most news stories addressed political maneuvering in the U.S. House and Senate.

A Nexis search of editorials published between July 5 and 12, 2003, turned up 33 editorials opposed to President Bush’s Head Start reform proposal based on worries about shifting control from the federal government to the states. Only nine editorials in favor of the President’s proposal were published during this time, applauding efforts to increase teacher certification and add a more academic component to the program.

As Head Start legislative proposals wind its way through the legislative process, stories probing deeper early childhood development issues will likely percolate among education writers. These may include an examination of current early childhood teacher preparation and certification measures, as well as the role of assessment in early childhood education.

High school exit and promotion exams

News coverage of high school and promotion exams has increased markedly (170 percent over last year), particularly following California’s decision to delay the high school exit exam. The Boston Globe has produced a series of enlightening and constructive stories on the issue that examine what it takes to support students who are struggling. For example, one two-part series looked at the role faithful attendance plays in student performance. Other stories featured community efforts to provide tutoring and remedial help. One reason for the increased sophistication of Massachusetts’ news coverage may be the third-party communication and research efforts provided by Mass Insight, an oft-quoted source for quotes and data persuading parents and voters to stay the course of higher standards.

Next generation of stories

“Needs Improvement” Schools

Following announcements of the state lists of schools “in need of improvement” — “the what” — the media lens will turn toward more of a focus on “the why.” News coverage is uncovering the types of schools on “the list,” looking at patterns discovered in the data that indicate particular strengths, weaknesses or connections to demographics, geography, teaching quality, type of curriculum, other practice, etc. For example, stories in Minnesota and Massachusetts have uncovered the dramatic effects attendance seems to have on student performance.

Choice and supplemental services

Most coverage of choice and supplemental services options under NCLB have focused on the organizational challenges district face in alerting parents to choice and providing sufficient transportation. An Atlanta Journal Constitution story was particularly representative:

“Many parents say school districts threw up too many obstacles. Some parents were offered lower-performing or equally bad schools, some couldn't get test score information to compare schools, and some said school officials actually discouraged them from transferring.” (*Atlanta Journal Constitution*, September 15, 2002)

Very few stories have addressed any positives of choice. It is viewed more as a disruption than a solution. This may improve as school district implementation of choice becomes more efficient and effective and results become available about its effects on achievement.

Teacher Quality

Like the “needs improvement” school announcements, stories about teacher quality will likely move from pronouncements of failure to a closer look at the elements of good teaching and whether and how they are addressed in teacher preparation and professional development. Perhaps reporters may take the opportunity to cover summer professional development institutes for teachers and principals.

Testing

News coverage of testing has always been popular, but it too is increasing in its level of sophistication and detail. The Hechinger Institute for Education & the Media hosted two regional seminars on testing and the Education Writers Association national conference in April featured several sessions on testing. High school exit exams and the upcoming release of more National Assessment of Educational Progress scores will continue to generate coverage. Some of the most positive, solution-oriented news coverage of testing has focused on specific changes made in response to test score data. For example, news coverage in Florida highlighted efforts to beef up literacy professional development among teachers in the fourth grade as a result of dips in test scores.

“Persistently dangerous” schools

The new requirement for states to define and measure school safety in an effort to identify and label “persistently dangerous” schools is sparking new attention to the validity and effectiveness of reporting measures of safety. Under NCLB, students who attend a school that is found “persistently dangerous” can transfer to another safer school.

Thus far, most coverage has focused on state definitions, problems in some states with underreporting of safety infractions and concerns that simply labeling a school will not lead to improved safety. For example, in Georgia any school with 1 percent of its students charged with a felony or 4 percent of its students charged with misdemeanor drug offenses for three consecutive years is deemed “persistently dangerous.” A common criticism sounded in news coverage is that there is “too much emphasis on labels and sanctions without offering enough solutions.” (*Times Union*, June 17, 2003)

Budget cuts

Coverage of education funding cuts dominated the news in December and January, but has dropped significantly since then. Still, approximately one out of every 10 education stories references funding cuts. With state budgets facing their worst crisis since World War II, news coverage of the impact budget constraints have on education will continue. Other stories expected are the number of parents taking advantage of school choice compared to last year, lawsuits around access to choice and creative options for providing choice, and special needs students (IDEA reauthorization).