

Executive Summary

Daily newspapers hold an honored place in American tradition as the principal forum for the public's conversation, but that seems to be changing. Americans today rate daily newspapers less "believable" than local and national television news, and a majority think newspaper reporters are out of touch with mainstream society.

This study, based on telephone surveys of education print reporters and analysis of 403 education-related articles published over eight months by four daily news publishers in Virginia, suggests the criticism may be warranted when it comes to daily newspaper coverage of elementary and secondary education.

Newspaper reporters unanimously agree that K-12 education is a complex issue, and nearly two-thirds (63%) say too little attention is paid to it. Most Americans would likely agree. Public education consistently ranks at or near the top of their domestic concerns, in part, because it is undergoing dynamic reform and innovation. Yet readers would have to look long and hard to find the larger education story in their daily newspapers:

Newspapers rely on the public school industry to set the education news agenda.

- Nearly two-thirds of journalists surveyed (63%) say the most common trigger for an education news story is "an announcement or press release by a federal, state, or local education agency."
- All journalists named federal and state Departments of Education, local public school boards and officials, teachers, and parents as sources used by their news organizations in the last six months. Half or fewer named public policy "think tanks" and independent research organizations as sources used during the same period (50% and 38%, respectively).
- Journalists cited the public school industry as their primary source of information on vouchers and tuition tax credits, despite that industry's open hostility to these innovations.

Newspapers' education news coverage is largely a conversation of, by, and for the public school industry.

- 65% of published articles related to topics of foremost interest to the public school industry, namely, public school funding, public school staffing, and public school wage and benefit proposals (261 of 403 articles).
- Other topics of public interest received substantially less attention:
 - 22% addressed student achievement/state Standards of Learning performance (88 articles);
 - 7% discussed the federal *No Child Left Behind Act* (28 articles);
 - 3% were related to miscellaneous matters such as school boundary proposals (14 articles); and
 - 3% addressed public education reforms and innovations such as charter schools, home schooling, vouchers, and tuition tax credits (12 articles).
- 95% of all sources cited in all articles were government/public school-affiliated sources (1,364 of 1,438 sources); 5% were non-government/public school-affiliated sources (74).

Newspapers disenfranchise other constituencies with a stake in the public education service and an interest in reforms and innovations to deliver the service more cost-effectively and better.

- Taxpayers who bear the cost of the public school service received scant attention from newspapers. In 261 public school funding-related articles, individual taxpayers were quoted six times (less than 1%) and taxpayer advocacy groups were never quoted.
- Only two of the 403 articles addressed vouchers and tuition tax credits, two public education innovations favored by about half of all citizens and parents, according to state and national polls.

Commitment to Citizens

"Commitment to citizens also means journalism should present a representative picture of all constituent groups in society. Ignoring certain citizens has the effect of disenfranchising them."

Project for Excellence in Journalism