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Education news in the mirror

How local media are serving the parents
who have the most on the line

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Introduction

Local news coverage of education has largely aligned with the information priorities of the public, devoting reporting resources on topics like teaching and learning during a critical period when the American school system was heavily disrupted by COVID-19.

Still, much of this coverage has come in the form of breaking news, as broadcasters, newspapers, and digital publications reported on the news of the day, leaving less opportunity for enterprise, investigative, feature-style, or service journalism.

Driving many of the stories about the local education system are official voices—elected leaders, school administrators, and state level bureaucrats, while the people who are disproportionately impacted by the school system—teachers, students, and parents—were seldom quoted in the stories studied.

And while a [February 2022 national survey](#) about education news found that many parents were unhappy with what they perceived to be a strong emphasis on negativity in education news, the picture that emerged in this study of education coverage is somewhat more complex, depicting a mix of stories in some cases heavily focused on revealing problems in the education system, but also solutions to those problems, as well as coverage that presented a mixture of both.

While these patterns were present across all the local media sectors studied, some local media stands out. In particular, local news organizations focused on serving communities of color—sometimes referred to as ethnic media—stood out for their use of non-breaking-news formats such as service journalism, their emphasis on reporting about solutions to education-related problems, and their attention to matters of race in the educational context.

These are some of the findings of a study commissioned by the [William and Flora Hewlett Foundation](#) to understand more about the quality of the education news that parents of color are being served.

The earlier companion survey found that parents of school-aged children in general, but especially Black and Hispanic parents, rely on local news outlets to stay informed about schools. Local TV and newspapers in particular are widely used and highly rated sources. The survey found that Black and Hispanic parents also frequently turn to Black and Latino media, in English and in Spanish, to stay up on school news.

This study analyzed local education coverage in a total of 142 newspapers, TV and radio stations, online-only publications, and news outlets that serve communities of color. The

total sample included nearly 1,500 stories in 20 different major U.S. media markets over a four-month period in late 2020 and early 2021 (see **Figure 4**).

Among the findings:

- Most education studied during the four-month period focused on breaking news and the latest events; for local TV, this accounted for about nine-in-ten stories (see **Figure 1**). Media serving communities of color were slightly more likely to offer a wider range of coverage formats, including service journalism.
- On the whole, local education coverage offers a mixture of good news and bad news about the school system. As shown in **Figure 2**, across the media sectors studied, between one-quarter and one-third of stories were heavily focused on solutions to problems, a similar proportion as emphasized exposing problems, or offering a mix of both.
- Teaching and learning, as well as school operations (closures and re-openings during COVID-19), were among the top themes covered by local media during the period of study. For most local media, these topics accounted for about half their education coverage (see **Table 1**).
- Coverage of race and ethnicity in the K-12 education system was a secondary theme, but this varied by media sector. **Figure 3** shows that among outlets serving communities of color, about a quarter of stories either touched on the topic of race, or else made it central. Newspapers and online-only outlets were the next most likely to do so. Radio and TV very rarely mentioned race or ethnicity at all.
- When it comes to whose voices are featured, the finding is clear: official sources are given the most prominence in local education coverage (see **Table 2**). This was especially true of general interest newspapers, where more than half of stories quoted a school official. When it came to teachers, parents, students, and community leaders, none of these groups showed up in more than 15% of newspaper stories studied.

These data were collected during a time of heightened intensity in the American educational system, brought on by the strains caused by COVID-19. As such, it is possible that patterns in coverage would look at least slightly different during ordinary times. It has been said, however, that studying media performance during a time of crisis is similar to road-testing a NASCAR vehicle—the pressure reveals more clearly what the thing is made of, its flaws and its strengths. Education coverage in local media, produced in a time of duress—yes, by beat specialists but often by general assignment reporters and

producers—manifests its own limitations even as it has found ways to meet the public’s information needs in other ways.

Interactive data visualizations of the content analysis are available on [Tableau Public](#).

Chapter 1: Most education coverage driven by external events; little enterprise reporting

While terms like ‘news’ and ‘journalism’ are often used interchangeably, researchers [have noted](#) that news is but one facet of a wide range of activities that constitutes journalism. The reporting of current events is one way—but not the only way—to keep audiences informed about what’s going on in their communities. Other types of journalism, such as investigations, analysis, and other forms of what the news industry calls enterprise reporting, have the ability to expose larger issues in society. Features can help us see the human dimension. And service journalism offers tools and resources for audiences to take action.

This study set out to understand just how much local coverage of education is focused on the news of the day, as opposed to other forms of journalism that can be characterized as press-driven or enterprise content. The results echo [other studies of local news](#), which have found that most coverage tends to be newsy—focusing on the basic ‘who,’ ‘what,’ ‘when,’ and ‘where,’ of any given event that happens in a community. But the findings here demonstrate just how widespread this emphasis on the news of the day was during a critical period in American education.

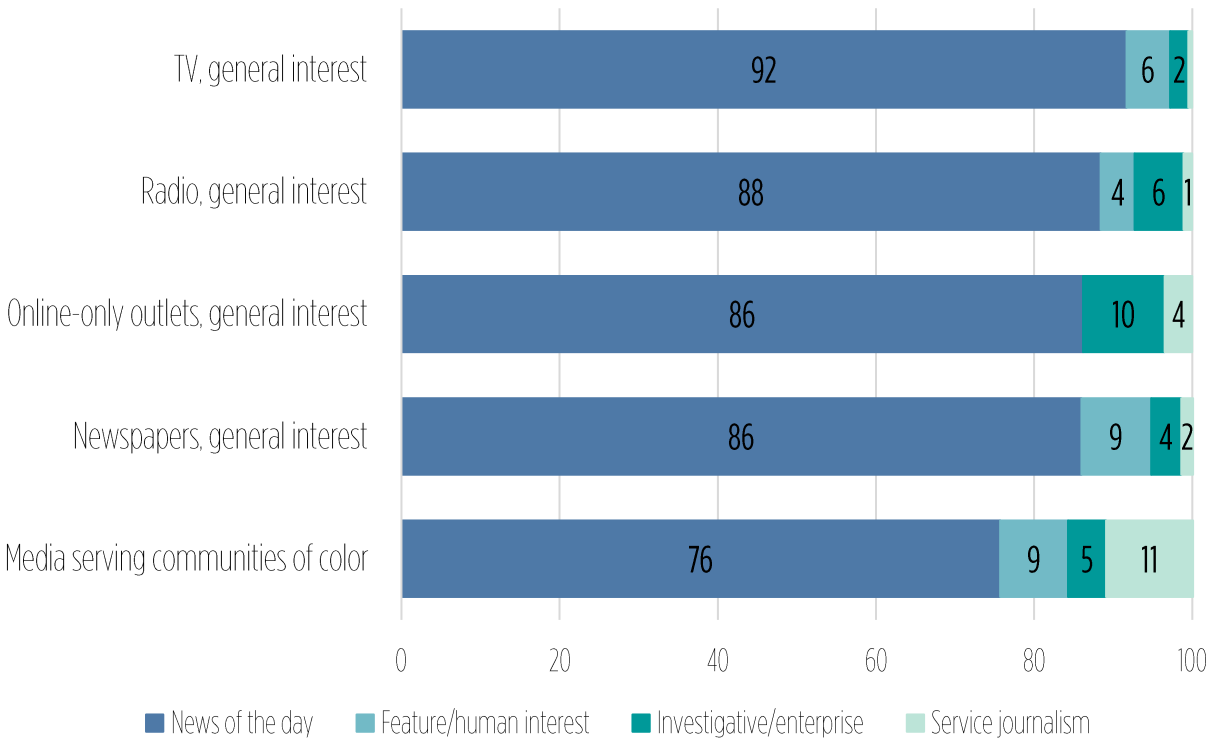
During the four-month period of study in late 2020 and early 2021, the vast majority of local education coverage focused on the news of the day. This was true of all media sectors studied—general interest newspapers, local TV and radio stations, as well as online-only outlets and news organizations serving communities of color, often referred to as ‘ethnic media.’

Depending on the media sector, at least three quarters of the content studied focused on the latest news, but especially local TV, which devoted 92% of its coverage to this format (see **Figure 1**).

It is worth noting that the radio category includes both commercial AM/FM programming as well as public radio. In many cases throughout this study, both types of radio followed similar patterns, but on this measure, commercial radio was a good deal more likely than public radio to emphasize the news of the day. Public radio was more likely to emphasize other forms of reporting, such as investigations.

Figure 1 Local education coverage dominated by breaking news

% of stories characterized as...



A typical example of this kind of ‘daily news’ coverage was broadcast on the Albuquerque NBC affiliate, during a 6PM Eyewitness News program in early December of 2020. Correspondent Patrick Hayes told viewers about a new policy that was being introduced in the school district that would change the way student attendance would be tracked and monitored.

News outlets focused on communities of color, in this case sampled heavily from Latino, Black, and to a small extent, Chinese media, were more likely than the other sectors studied to offer various forms of press-driven content. About one-quarter of stories from these media focused on features, service journalism, and investigative formats. In this sector, about one-in-ten stories were classified as service journalism, a format that hardly appeared at all in other local media.

Sol de Medianoche—a Latino-focused media outlet based in Anchorage, Alaska, produced an [October 2021 article](#) after local school districts had once again postponed reopening. It offered a roundup of advice and tips from local educators on how parents and other caregivers can help their child with online learning, including how to use online

translation and dictation tools. The article provided an email address for the Spanish language and cultural liaison for the Anchorage school district.

To be sure, measuring the total proportion of stories across different formats is just one way of assessing the value of what news providers are offering to their audiences. Indeed, it is an imperfect one. Enterprise reporting is time- and labor-intensive, and thus is costly for newsrooms to produce. In part, these results may be interpreted as a sign of the times: Local news outlets simply can't afford to produce a consistent stream of in-depth reporting and analysis due to the weakened [state of the industry](#). What's more, though press-driven stories were few and far between in the total content that was sampled, a single enterprise story can have wider-reaching impact than dozens of breaking news articles. Nevertheless, the vast majority of local news audiences are getting a steady stream of news in their feed, often about events that have already occurred or are underway. That leaves fewer journalistic resources to help communities deepen their understanding, hold their school leaders and elected officials accountable, or feel empowered to act on challenges related to their children's learning.

Chapter 2: Local education coverage highlights a mixture of problems and solutions

A majority of American parents surveyed for our [2022 study](#) of education news access agreed with the statement that ‘the news media mostly report on the problems without sharing information on how to solve those problems.’ This view was shared by 67% of parents and most commonly held among White parents.

But to what extent is this negativity bias reflected in actual media coverage of education? To answer this question, the stories analyzed in this study were assessed on a variety of characteristics. Does the story mostly focus on a problem related to schools and education? Does the story mostly focus on solutions to a school-related problem? Does the story focus on a relatively even mix of both problems and solutions? In addition, some stories did not fit the problem/solution framework at all, and so these were classified as focused on neither problems or solutions.

The results suggest that on the whole, local education coverage offers a mixture of good and bad news about the school system. As shown in **Figure 2**, across the entire range of media sectors studied, anywhere from one-in-five to one-in-three stories were focused primarily on solutions. This is roughly similar to the proportion devoted to highlighting problems, as well as to a mixture of both problems and solutions. In each of the media sectors studied, a smaller proportion of stories were not focused on problems or solutions at all.

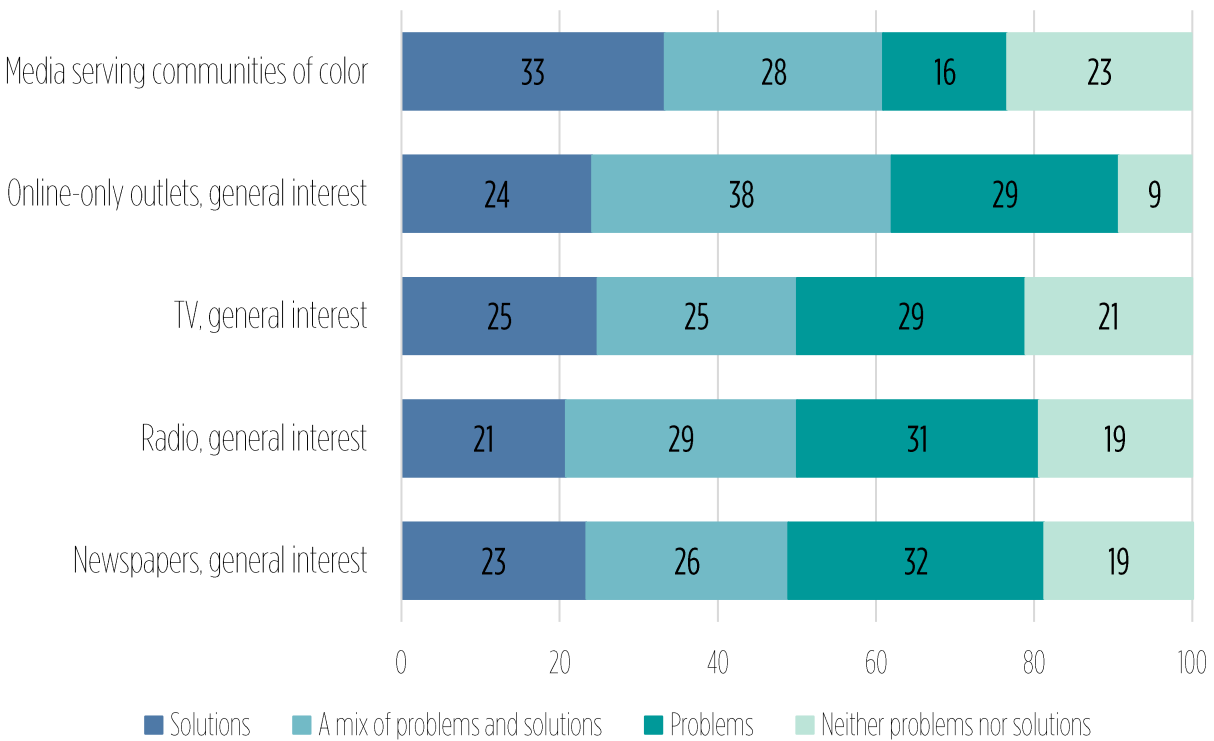
Local media serving communities of color were more likely than other local sectors to emphasize solutions in their education coverage, at 33% of stories studied during the four-month period. Radio coverage—among both public and commercial stations—was least likely to emphasize solutions, at 21%.

Mundo Hispanico, a Spanish-language publication based in Atlanta, illustrated this type of coverage with an [October 2020 feature](#) profiling Nury Castillo Crawford, a Peruvian immigrant who has increased local support for Hispanic and Latino learners and families through workshops, grant-writing, and cultivating support from local businesses.

General interest daily newspapers were among the most likely to emphasize problems in their local education coverage, with 32% of their stories focused primarily on things that are going wrong in the school system. This share is roughly twice the proportion devoted to similar framing among news providers serving communities of color.

Figure 2 Local education stories highlight mix of problems and solutions

% of stories that mainly focus on...



For example, a December Minneapolis Star Tribune reported on “Another challenge for strained school budgets,” explaining the link between a recent reduction in applications for free and reduced-price lunch and a potential decline in federal funding.

The findings here suggest that local education news, at least during the time period studied, is not universally focused on problems, but neither is it heavily focused on solutions to the problems that get exposed in the news. Still, in the eyes of a majority of parents whose children are in the school system, there is a perception that education coverage is focused on everything that’s broken.

Is there a disconnect between what parents are perceiving and what news providers are actually offering? Possibly, but it’s also worth considering that this study of news content does not account for national news coverage of schools, a genre that could be influencing parents’ perceptions about negativity.

Additionally, parent attitudes about the news may be at least partially influenced by perceptions that are not entirely grounded in the empirical reality of what actually appears in media outlets. The Pew Research Center and others have found that when survey respondents are asked to report what comes to mind when they think of a news

organization, it is often national cable television personalities that come to mind. This perception of the media may color respondents' attitudes when they are responding to attitudinal questions about media performance, even on a matter like local news coverage of K-12 education. Other research outside of the survey realm has also found that individuals sometimes telegraph their impressions of media performance even when they are not regularly consuming that media.¹

¹ February 25, 2022 conversation with Sue Robinson, regarding her fieldwork that ultimately contributed to the 2018 book, *Networked News, Racial Divides: How Power and Privilege Shape Public Discourse in Progressive Communities*.

Chapter 3: Teaching and learning, school closures lead local coverage of education

During the period of analysis for this study—October of 2020 through January of 2021—the American school system was in a state of flux. Many of the large, metropolitan public school systems around the country had started the halting return to in-person learning, and many had begun to see rising case numbers of COVID-19 infections in schools. Meanwhile, many parents, guardians, and other caregivers were still navigating the complexities of keeping their children on track in a virtual or other home-based learning environment. The Delta and Omicron variants of the virus had yet to emerge, but neither was a vaccine available for teachers and other school staff, much less children in the K-12 system. National discourse about topics like history curriculum had not yet risen to the surface.

In that context, a look at the themes present in local education news offers a window into how journalists set their priorities in the midst of an evolving crisis.

Across all of the local media sectors studied, two topics appeared to receive the most coverage: teaching and learning, as well as school operations (primarily related to closures and re-openings). In this study, stories were classified as focused on teaching and learning if they reported on broad trends in instructional style, learning methods, classroom practices, student performance, and the like. Stories focused on in-home learning as well as in-person learning were included here. Additionally, stories were classified as focused on school operations if they reported on closures and re-openings either district-wide or in individual cases. Stories about general school infrastructure, academic calendars and events, as well as the general business of running a school building, were included here.

For most local media, these two topics accounted for about half of all education stories in the four-month period studied (see **Table 1**).

This was especially true of local TV, which devoted fully 62% of its coverage to these two topics.

The Birmingham, Alabama, local Fox affiliate offered a typical example of local coverage of school closures and openings in a December 2020 broadcast. “Students in Pell City Schools are moving to distance learning because of the increase in COVID-19 cases and quarantines,” the anchor read. “The distance learning will go through December 18.”

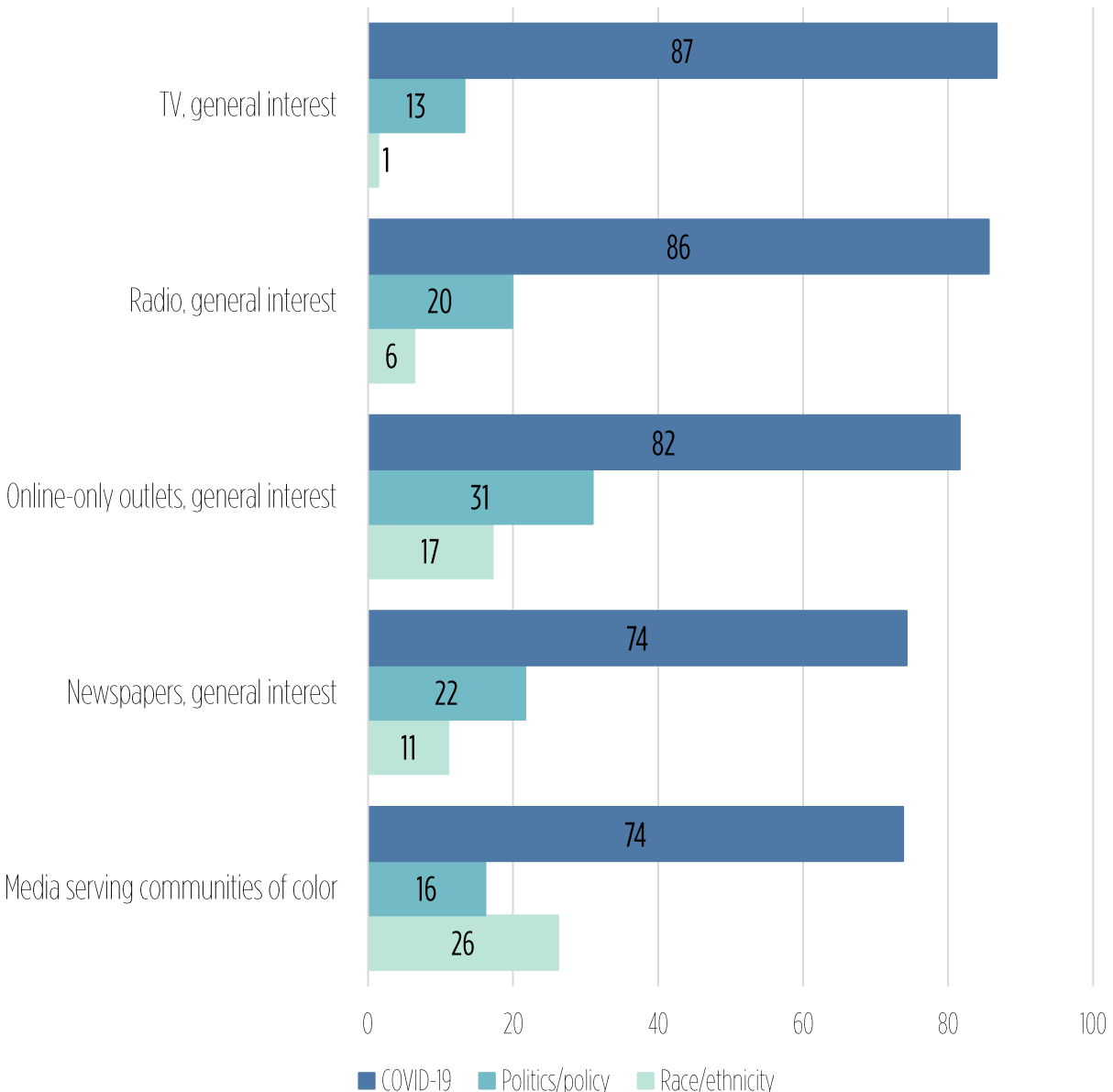
Table 1 Teaching and learning is a top priority of local news coverage

<i>% of stories that focus on...</i>	Teaching & Learning	School Operations	Health in Schools	School Sports	Ed Policy or Politics	Finance, Budget, or Funding	School Safety	Labor Issues	Race/Ethnicity in Schools
Newspapers, general interest	22	22	10	21	11	5	5	2	2
Radio, general interest	32	24	14	6	10	3	2	5	3
TV, general interest	29	33	17	6	6	1	4	3	1
Online-only outlets, general interest	31	21	13	0	13	14	4	2	4
Media serving communities of color	30	23	15	4	5	9	2	3	9

To what extent was COVID-19 a factor in the local media treatment of these topics? To answer that question, stories were combed for even passing references to the virus. And indeed, **Figure 3** shows that the vast majority of stories in each of the sectors studied contained at least a passing reference to COVID-19.

Figure 3 COVID-19 makes an appearance in vast majority of local ed coverage

% of stories at that at least referenced...



Other themes were present in education coverage besides teaching/learning and school operations. But these factored less prominently. For instance, few stories were devoted to issues related to race and ethnicity in K-12 education.

Local outlets geared toward communities of color made race and ethnicity the primary focus of about one-in-ten stories; for the rest of the local sectors studied, this emphasis was barely present at all.

As with COVID-19, researchers cast a wider net to capture even passing references to race and ethnicity in local education coverage. Here the gap between media serving communities of color and general interest news providers was even wider: About one-in-four ethnic media stories at least addressed race, followed by newspapers and online only outlets. But radio and TV very rarely mentioned race or ethnicity.

In some cases, the focus on racial disparities in education was given the full treatment, as with an [October 2020 story](#) in the Los Angeles Sentinel, a Black newspaper serving the region. The story detailed the findings of a UCLA study showing disparities in school suspensions among racial and ethnic groups.

Other topics received small or moderate levels of attention, as listed in **Table 1**. Few outlets devoted coverage to labor issues—an issue made especially relevant by the working conditions in local schools amidst COVID-19 concerns. School safety outside of COVID-19 health matters also received scant attention. Across most local media, school sports was relatively absent, although local newspapers devoted a larger share of its education coverage to sports at 21%.

Two substantive issues generated a moderate amount of attention: school policy and budgets. Together, these topics received very little attention on local TV but were the subject of 26% of education coverage in online-only news outlets.

A [January 2021 story](#) in the CT Mirror is a case in point, reporting on how a group of advocates were calling on the Connecticut governor to address the widening learning gaps between the state's most and least vulnerable students.

Based on the education coverage priorities of local news outlets, it is reasonable to suggest that the press and the public may not be in perfect alignment, but there are a number of points of common connection.

When asked in [August of 2021](#) about what journalists should focus on when it comes to COVID-19 and education, parents cited the following as their top three issues: student health and safety (67%), policy changes such as school closures and openings (62%), and student learning amid COVID-19 disruptions (58%). Slightly lower on the list were the actions of elected officials and school policy decisions (52%) and the impact of COVID-19 on students from disadvantaged backgrounds (43%).

Local media coverage priorities mapped onto these public priorities in journalists' emphasis on teaching and learning as well as school operations, though the limited media attention to student health in the midst of the pandemic seems at least slightly at odds with the relative urgency expressed by parents.

One area for further consideration, however, is local media's relative lack of attention to race and ethnicity in the school system. Hispanic and Black parents [have indicated](#) at higher rates than white parents that they see a lack of media attention to inequality. And when the media does cover the intersection of race and education, these same parents are more likely to view that coverage as flawed by stereotyping.

To what extent ought parent or other audience news priorities influence the local news agenda, on matters related to K-12 education or anything else? This depends in part on the composition of the newsrooms that are setting the agenda. Freedom of the press is enshrined in the Constitution and valued to a degree in American culture. Journalists, we say, should be free from influence by special interests, and beyond that, should not simply allow the public to supplant their own sense of news judgment. But this becomes problematic when newsroom composition does not reflect the communities they serve, but rather, a more selective group of high-status individuals. In ways that are sometimes invisible to news leaders, the news agenda is shaped by the interests and perspectives of a privileged class of journalists who are not always in touch with their communities.

Until local newsrooms more fully reflect the racial and economic diversity of their communities, they will not be fully responsive to the concerns that many parents have about equity in the classroom. As such, they ought to consider the survey findings from parents of color that coverage related to inequality should be prioritized, and that newsrooms should do what it takes to ensure their coverage of race in education avoids stereotyping.

Chapter 4: Official sources feature prominently in education coverage

Who gets featured in a local news story as a source, quoted or summarized, is a matter of representation. It is also a reflection of whose voices are prioritized and allowed to shape the narrative of a news event.

In education coverage, school personnel, public and elected officials, but also community members are all potential sources for stories. Each in their own way has a stake in the system. To understand whose voices are most prominent in local education coverage, each story in the four-month sample was scanned for the presence of sources. Each time a source was quoted, either directly or indirectly, researchers recorded the instance and classified it according to a list of source categories.

A clear finding emerged across all the local media sectors studied: Official sources are given the most prominence in education coverage (see **Table 2**). Specifically, this refers to school administrators—principals, superintendents, and the like. It also refers to politicians and government officials—elected school board members, mayors, governors, and state education bureaucrats.

In each of the media sectors studied, school administrators and government sources easily eclipsed other types of sources in the number of appearances they made in stories.

This was especially true of general interest newspapers, which were more likely than other types of media to include sources to begin with. Among the newspaper stories studied, more than half quoted a school official. Four-in-ten quoted a politician. Yet, people with less authority in the educational system were quoted less often by newspaper reporters. These perspectives included those of teachers, parents, students, and community leaders. None of these groups showed up in more than 15% of newspaper stories studied.

Online-only news outlets followed a similar pattern as newspapers. No type of media studied was as likely as this sector to quote government officials (62%). These digital native publications were also slightly more likely than most other sectors to quote a range of sources, official and otherwise, even as official sources dominated.

General interest radio and local TV, as well as media serving communities of color, all had a somewhat more even distribution (public radio in particular was twice as likely as commercial AM/FM radio to quote teachers). That is in part because these sectors do less sourcing in general.

Table 2 Most local media prominently feature official sources

<i>% of stories that quote...</i>	School Admin	Politician or Govt Official	Teacher	Parent	Expert	Student	Union Rep	Community Leader	Coach
Newspapers, general interest	56	42	15	15	11	14	7	9	11
Radio, general interest	27	24	17	9	10	5	7	2	1
TV, general interest	38	29	17	18	11	9	11	2	3
Online-only outlets, general interest	43	62	17	19	19	14	17	17	0
Media serving communities of color	30	36	12	14	11	6	6	15	1

This study is not the first to find that reporters tend to emphasize official sources over community members in their reporting. In *Networked News, Racial Divides*, author Sue Robinson found that reporters explicitly leaned on official sources so that they could avoid getting too deep into the more challenging topic of racial disparities in the school system. But this emphasis on official sourcing had the effect of suggesting that the news organization itself at least informally sanctioned the official view of things, rather than the views held by community voices. This is made all the more problematic when we understand that the official narrative about schools, opportunity, and achievement are flawed (consider Gloria Ladson-Billings' and others work on recasting the "achievement gap" narrative).

In a normative sense, robust and diverse sourcing is valued in the news industry, or at least, those values are expressed. Official sources have a great deal of authority, decision-making power, and status. Education journalists are acting within the appropriate bounds of their profession to seek comments from these individuals and to place them on the record. At the same time, teachers, parents, and students experience the challenges of the education system on a more acute and personal level. What's more, local news audiences comprise ordinary people more than elite actors. For the sake of these audiences, local providers of education news should consider ways that they can increase representation in their stories.

Conclusion

This study contains descriptive data that offers a snapshot of how local news covered education during a critical period in American K-12 education. It assesses the themes that local outlets emphasize, finding that for the most part, these align generally with the news interests that parents have. It shows that much of the local coverage of education focuses on the news of the day, with much less devoted to the expensive work of enterprise reporting, or the creative work of service journalism. The study shows that local press tends to lean on official sources most often, and when it comes to emphasizing solutions in education coverage, there is a wide range of approaches at play.

To be sure, there is some variation between different media sectors. Outlets geared toward communities of color tend to give more space to solutions journalism and to coverage of race and ethnicity in schools. But these differences are somewhat modest.

The findings in the study suggest a handful of recommendations, as well as further questions for researchers to explore:

- **Credible education reporting is out there, but serious capital is needed.** Some local education reporting operates at the surface, fails to connect the news to deeper systemic issues, and erases community voices. But many local outlets are doing this differently to earn the trust of the communities they serve. Outlets focused on communities of color are leading with their emphasis on service journalism and elevating issues related to race in education. Online-only publications and some newspapers are producing deep coverage focused on institutions and school policy. But for all these, access to capital remains an existential issue. Funders at the national and local level—for instance, community foundations—should consider that positive outcomes in local schools require empowered and informed parents, and should design their funding priorities accordingly.
- **More journalism, less news?** It may seem strange to call for less information of any kind, but the findings from this study suggest that the news of the day—basic information about what’s going on in schools—dominates local education coverage. To be sure, this content is necessary, but to a point. Increasingly it is schools themselves that are providing it to families and communities. One alternative is what Sarah Alvarez, founder and editor of Outlier Media in Detroit, [calls “pre-news.”](#) It’s the raw matter that equips individuals to make decisions and in some cases, survive, distributed through networks that include journalists as facilitators and advocates, not just broadcasters or writers. And communities

would benefit from other forms of education reporting, through investigations, narrative storytelling, and service journalism—though again, this is tied to a capacity and funding issue.

- **Elevate the voices from the community in education reporting.** Official sources are necessary and valuable in education reporting, and institutional news organizations are uniquely positioned to place these sources on the record and hold them accountable to the public. Yet, when official sources overwhelm other voices, their framing of education issues can overwhelm coverage and drive the narrative. Teachers, parents, students and community leaders ought to be more visible in education coverage, not just because their voices matter from a standpoint of representation. But also, their perspectives can help complicate narratives about schools, and lead to a messier but more truthful story in the end.

This study does not answer all the important questions about education news. It offers a snapshot of coverage from around the U.S. in a moment of crisis. The advantage of this study and its sample is its breadth. But further research would do well to dive deeper into specific pockets of coverage emerging from individual media sectors. For instance, exploring the ways that public media organizations distinguish themselves from other broadcast media. Or, exploring how digital startups are experimenting with new modes of journalism to tackle school-related information needs. Additional exploration of media serving communities of color should compare broadcast to print-based to digital media within that cohort, and look at additional coverage in other languages besides those studied here.

The American school system is a critical civic asset. But it is under duress. Any effort to improve the system, or make it more responsive to marginalized communities, will require trusted information and news. This study reflects the state of local education coverage today, itself part of a larger civic asset—the news media—that is also under duress. But even under strain, these two institutions have perhaps never been more critical for life in a democratic society.

Methodology

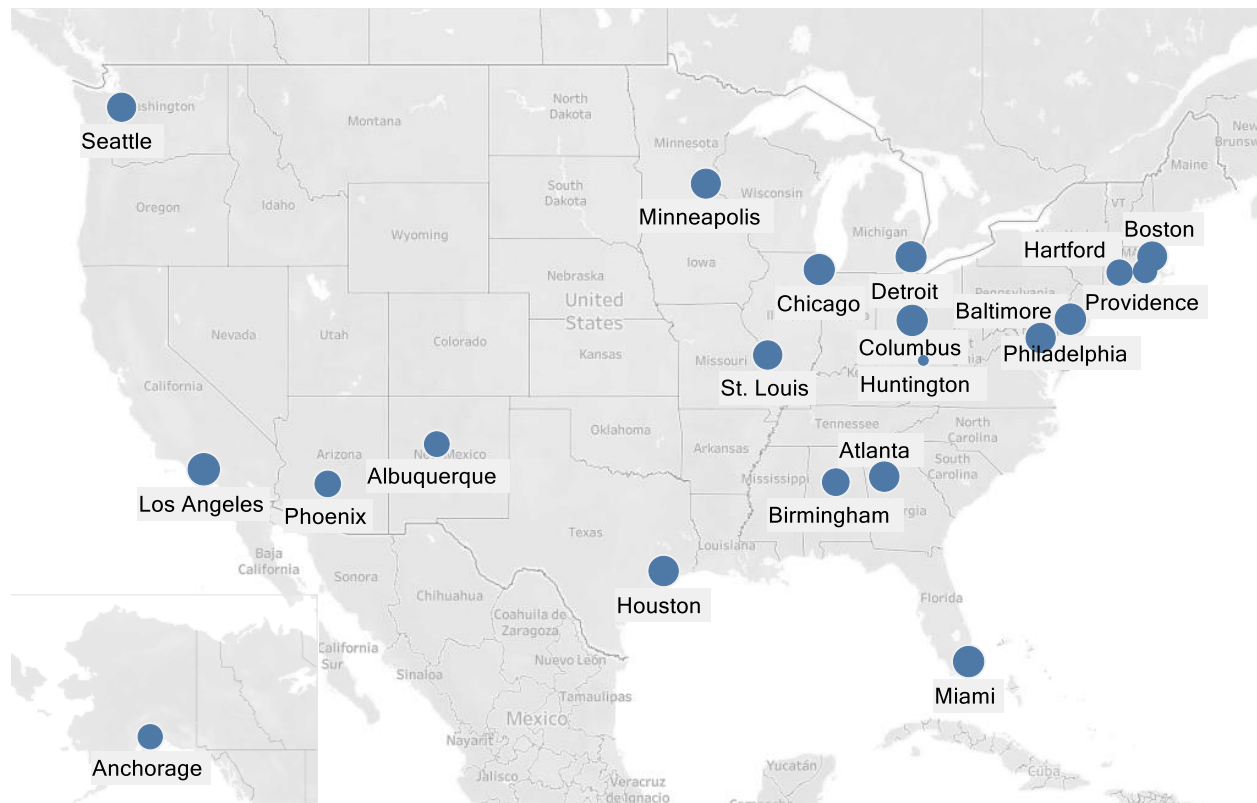
This study is based on local U.S. news media coverage of K-12 education during the period of October 1, 2020, through January 31, 2021. A total of 1,430 stories about local education issues were studied in 142 different news outlets.

Sample composition

Twenty major media markets were selected from the four U.S. Census regions around the country. In each state selected, the largest media market was identified and sampled. In each market, the leading TV station, daily newspaper, commercial and public radio ratings leader, and a local online-only outlet were identified and sampled. In addition, Black, Latino/Spanish-language publications and broadcasters were identified and sampled. In markets where available, Chinese media were collected and sampled.

Stories were collected primarily through a tool called Critical Mention, which archives media across platforms. A Boolean search was conducted to identify stories related to K-12 education and schools. Stories were sampled from each week during the time period studied. **Figure 4** displays a map of the stories that were sampled and coded in the content analysis.

Figure 4 Map of stories used in content analysis



Variables studied

In all, a total of 18 variables were developed, tested, and trained on:

- K-12 education focus
- Story date
- Story ID
- Source
- Media sector
- Story length
- Ethnic media
- Story format
- Geographic focus
- Story location
- Education sub-topic
- Non-COVID focus
- Politics/policy focus
- Race/ethnicity mention
- Featured perspectives
- Type of school featured
- Solutions journalism
- Style

Intercoder reliability

A team of coders were trained on the codebook and tested across all variables studied, until an acceptable level of inter-rater agreement was reached. During the coding process, points of disagreement were resolved through consensus.

Appendix: Content analysis codebook

NEWS COVERAGE OF K-12 EDUCATION HEWLETT FOUNDATION CONTENT ANALYSIS CODEBOOK

In this codebook you will find information on variables included in the Hewlett Foundation-supported study of K-12 education news coverage. This codebook includes variable names, definitions and applicable procedures, specifics on changes that were made to certain variables.²

LIST OF VARIABLES

- K-12 education focus
- Story date
- Story ID
- Source
- Media sector
- Story length
- Ethnic media
- Story format
- Geographic focus
- Story location
- Education sub-topic
- Non-COVID focus
- Politics/policy focus
- Race/ethnicity mention
- Featured perspectives
- Type of school featured
- Solutions journalism
- Style

² Several of the variables in this study were adapted from the Pew Research Center's News Coverage Index, including story date, media sector, story length, story format, and geographic focus.

K-12 EDUCATION FOCUS

Definition: Select ‘yes’ if the story references K-12 education in a substantive way in the story (including at the school/district/municipal/statewide/national level). “Substantive” is more than a passing reference in the middle of a story; includes discussion of the topic in the headline, lead, and/or multiple times throughout the story. If you code a story as ‘2,’ then do not proceed any further with coding. Skip to the next story on your list.

Note: If the story is about college only, story should be coded as ‘2.’

Codes: Yes..... 1
No2

STORY DATE

Definition: This variable designates the date on which the news story was published, broadcast, or posted.

Procedure: Express year, then month, then date (year/month/date).

Example: December 12, 2020 = 20201212

No date: 99

STORY ID

Definition: This variable provides a unique ID number for each news story.

Procedure: The number will automatically be assigned to each story by QuickBase.

SOURCE

Definition: Designates the outlet (and program for broadcast media) in which the individual news story appeared.

Procedure: Enter the name of the news outlet in the field provided (example: The Daily Record).

Note: Sometimes the proper name of the outlet might not be self-evident (is it ‘WOOD TV 8, or just WOOD TV?’). Do not worry too much about the details; just use your best judgment and move on.

MEDIA SECTOR

Definition: This is a variable that is not coded but recoded from the variable “source” in order to help analyze data. Default to the native media platform, if there is a

question about which sector to choose. For instance—a digital text-based story that appears on NPR.org, would be coded as ‘radio,’ since NPR is a radio organization originally.

Note: You can reference this project’s internal database if you are unsure about how to code this one. All outlets in the study have been pre-coded already.

Codes:

Newspaper	1
Magazine	2
Online-only	3
Local TV.....	4
Radio.....	5

STORY LENGTH

Duration in seconds

Definition: It is the amount of time in seconds for a broadcast story only, calculated by subtracting story start time from story end time.

Procedure: Enter the number minutes/seconds in the field provided (e.g., 02:31).

Note: Do your best to exclude advertising content in your calculations.

Story word count

Definition: Designates the word count of each individual print and online news story.

Procedure: Copy and paste story into Word document and run "word count" tool, or else use another technique that works best for you. Do NOT count headlines, sub-heads, datelines, bylines, or photo captions.

Broadcast: 999

ETHNIC MEDIA

Definition: This variable designates whether the news outlet is a so-called “ethnic media” organization, whose mission is to serve a specific ethnic or language-based community

Procedure: Arrive at the correct code for this variable by looking at the name of the outlet, the language of publication/broadcast, or the ‘about’ section of its website.

Codes:	African American, English-language	1
	Hispanic/Latino, English-language.....	2
	Hispanic/Latino, Spanish-language	3
	Chinese, Chinese-language	4
	Other, English-language.....	5
	Other, non-English	6
	Not an ethnic media outlet	7

STORY FORMAT

Definition: Measures the type and origin of stories. It designates, at a basic level, whether the news story is a product of original reporting or drawn from another news source. It delineates stories within the publication or broadcast, while measuring the stories’ type and origin.

Procedure: To determine the authorship of the story. Look at both the byline at the top of the story, and any credit lines that are included at the bottom of the story to determine authorship. If necessary, visit the source’s website to determine whether authorship is original to the outlet.

Print and Online News Web Sites

Codes:	Internal staff: Designates a story that has been reported by internal staff, with or without a byline (byline = the name of the author, often appearing under the headline of the article).	1
	Wire (includes both parent and non-parent companies, such as Associated Press)	2
	Combo wire/staff	3
	Other news outlet	4
	Other: non-staff/non-wire stories, or no source/cannot tell.....	5

Broadcast TV and Radio

Codes:	Internal staff: Designates a story that has been reported, aired, or narrated by the local anchor or reporters.....	6
	Nonlocal: a broadcast story that airs from the radio or TV company’s national headquarters or bureau	7

GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS

Definition: This variable concerns the geographic area to which the topic is relevant in relation to the location of the news source. If there is a mix of geographic focus, code for the geographic area that is emphasized by the MAJORITY OF TIME OR SPACE.

Codes:

- Local: story focuses on the metropolitan area within which the media source is published or broadcast.....0
- Statewide: story focuses on the state in which the media source is published or broadcast. Stories that highlight multiple areas throughout the state would be coded here..... 1
- U.S. national: story focuses outside the state of the media source, or on the nation as a whole2
- U.S. Intl: story refers to the U.S. in relation to some other national entity, such as a story about U.S. trade relations with Mexico. Such stories can be about non-government entities, such as sports team and tourism, for example3
- Non-U.S. International: Story refers to a nation outside the United States and does NOT make any explicit reference to the U.S.4
- No Specific Geographic Focus: The story does not have a particular geographic focus or deals across all geographies. Some examples are stories about a new diet or how to improve your garden. Stories concerning global impact would be either 3 or 4, depending on the emphasis given the U.S. ...5
- Don't Know/Can't Tell:..... 9

STORY LOCATION [NOTE: FILTER VARIABLE. WILL ONLY APPEAR IF '0' IS SELECTED ABOVE.]

Definition: The city and state that is the main focus of the news story

Procedure: Enter the place name in the field provided (example: Los Angeles, California). If unclear—for instance, if the story is about the metro region surrounding the city in question—default to the city that the news outlet is based within.

EDUCATION SUB-TOPIC

Definition: The topic within the broader area of education that the news is focused on. Select the best option, even if none is a perfect fit.

Codes: Teaching and learning (trends, practices, etc., including in-home learning and in-school learning)	1
Education policy/politics (narrow- select this code if the story is mostly about the process of crafting, introducing, debating, or approving a policy or law, or if it is mostly about the details of an election or political campaign).....	2
Finance/budget/funding	3
Health in schools (Nutrition, physical fitness; COVID stories should be coded as ‘health’ only if the story is narrowly focused on infection rates).....	4
School safety (violence in schools; gun safety; non-health related)	5
School sports	6
Race/ethnicity in schools	7
School operations (openings and closings, academic calendars).....	8
Labor issues (such as teacher’s rights, union disputes, etc.)	9

NON-COVID FOCUS

Definition: Select ‘yes’ if the story does NOT focus in some way on the COVID-19 crisis

Codes: Yes.....	1
No	2

POLITICS/POLICY FOCUS

Definition: Select ‘yes’ if the story references policies, regulations, or electoral politics in a substantive way in the story (especially at the municipal/statewide/national level). “Substantive” is more than a passing reference in the middle of a story; includes discussion of the topic in the headline, lead, and/or multiple times throughout the story. While it is arguable that any decision affecting students is technically ‘policy,’ this variable is intended to be somewhat narrower than that. We are primarily interested in the domain of laws, elections, and ordinances.

Codes:	Yes.....	1
	No	2

RACE/ETHNICITY MENTION

Definition: Indicates whether racial and/or ethnic groups are explicitly mentioned in any part of the story. For instance, Black, African American, Latina/Latino, Latinx, Asian, White, and so on.

Codes:	Yes.....	1
	No	2

FEATURED PERSPECTIVES

Definition: Voices or perspectives that are featured and/or quoted in the story. Select all that apply. In order to be selected, someone in the list below must be quoted or interviewed directly in the news story, or else had their views summarized in the news story. If someone is featured and/or quoted in the story, select the best checkbox option available, even if none is a perfect fit.

Note: Polls and surveys should be considered here. If it is a survey of parents or teachers, then check ‘parent’ or ‘teacher’ below, for instance. However, references to a vote or an election should not be considered to be a perspective.

[checkbox coding variable]

Codes:	Student (current or former)	1
	Parent/guardian (including if they are in a PTA capacity)	2
	Teacher (including teachers serving in union capacity)	3
	School admin (principal, VP, superintendent, etc.).....	4
	Politician/govt staff (governor, mayor, city council, school board).....	5
	Community leader, non-parent (PTA rep, volunteer, activist)	6
	Union representative (use this if they are not a teacher)	7
	Expert (scientist, health professional, etc.)	8
	Coach	9

TYPE OF SCHOOL FEATURED

Definition: Designates what type of school system the story discusses. If it is unclear from the story, or if schools are used generically, select #4.

Codes:	Public (traditional)- not charter. Includes ‘city schools’	1
	Non-public (private, homeschool, or charter)	2

Traditional Public AND other type, such as private, homeschool, charter	3
No specific school type	4

SOLUTIONS JOURNALISM

Definition: Designates whether the story is highlighting solutions to a problem, or simply expose/document a problem. Most news stories will not include the journalist’s personal opinion about potential solutions to social or civic problems. But many may include reports of other actor’s attempts to solve a problem—this is what we are trying to document. Examples of solutions include a policy, regulation, or law intended to protect or improve the lives of the community (students, teachers, families). Other solutions-oriented reports might include examples of community members taking an action, or advocating an action, to protect or improve the lives of those around them. Problems include the simple documentation of a crisis, a threat, or inequity.

Examples of problems:

- Outbreak of COVID cases
- Crumbling infrastructure (i.e. HVAC disruption or water main break)
- Labor disputes
- Parent/student/community fears and stress indicators
- Negative impacts of remote instruction

Examples of solutions:

- Resolution of a labor dispute
- Resolution of safe, in-person learning (if framed as a response to something negative—such as the inferiority of remote learning; or if framed as part of a broader set of positive steps such as declining cases or improved safety strategies)
- Academic calendar adjustments IF in response to a stated problem or conflict (i.e., to accommodate religious groups)
- Pay increases, raises, or other incentives for school personnel as a reward for performance or perseverance through pandemic learning

Examples of neither solution nor problem:

- Stories about school format (in-person or remote) will be coded this way, if the story is simply stating the facts about learning venue.

Procedure: Only focus on paragraphs (or, if audio/video content, focus on the broadcaster’s statements) that are either about a problem or a solution. Disregard paragraphs that are focused on neither of these.

Codes:

Story is mostly focused on solutions (two-thirds or more of relevant paragraphs)	1
Story is focused on a mix of problems and solutions (between one-third and two-thirds of relevant paragraphs)	2
Story is not very focused on solutions (less than one-third of relevant paragraphs)	3
Story is neither focused on problems nor solutions	99

STYLE

Definition: Designates the type of journalism being done in the news story.

Codes:

News of the day (Focused on straightforward accounts of who/what/when/where).....	1
Investigative/enterprise (often lengthier, digs into the ‘why’ of a story; ambitious and in-depth; somewhat rarer than news of the day)	2
Service journalism (equips audience with tools to response to a challenge) .	3
Feature/human interest (“soft news”, often focuses on a single person or inspiring story	4