



**Put Down Your Pencils Please:
Media Coverage of Education Reform
2007-2008**

A FrameWorks Research Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The goal of this study was to understand how major national and selected local media cover the ongoing debates over education reform. The study examined all relevant stories about reforms aimed at the pre-K through high school years from June 1, 2007, through July 31, 2008. This time period included many months of the presidential primary campaign as well as a short-lived Congressional effort to reauthorize the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law.

Education reform is a *newspaper* story and a local one at that. Newspapers dominated coverage of education reform. The three national news magazines ran only 11 stories in the period, while four TV news outlets and NPR contributed only six stories. While national events like the Presidential election were part of the news coverage, local events and debates constituted the more significant part of coverage.

Episodic coverage narrowly edged out thematic approaches. More than half (54 percent) of all stories covered education reform in an episodic fashion focusing on discrete events of school systems rather than broader, more thematic approaches. Coverage was clearly focused on problems and solutions in the education system. A plurality (44 percent) of stories explored problems and solutions — only 5 percent of stories presented the situation in America's schools as a crisis. When it comes to who suffers the consequences of inaction, however, individual students constitute 81 percent of the mentions, reversing the thematic trend.

Reform means improving student achievement. Nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of the time, reform was defined as improving student achievement. In a distant second place came calls to increase accountability (20 percent of discussions). When reporters and sources advanced arguments or rationales on the need for reform, improving student achievement was ranked first among the arguments made (36 percent of discussions). This may be one of several areas where the overall impact of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is seen on framing news coverage.

Resources required for reform were most often expressed in terms of money. Cold hard cash was the most frequently discussed resource connected with education reform, accounting for 41 percent of resource discussions. Money was also the dominant way of framing the costs of education reform, accounting for 60 percent of cost discussions.

Costs beyond the monetary variety are seldom presented in news coverage. The monetary costs of education reform accounted for 60 percent of all costs mentioned. In contrast, the human costs of education reform accounted for 26 percent, jobs/labor markets were cited in 11 percent of cost discussions, and more general societal costs accounted for only 2 percent of all coverage.

Students and parents are minor actors in education reform. In media discussions of the actors who have a role in education reform, parents and students account for just 2 percent of discussions apiece. Students and parents fare slightly better as sources in the news, accounting for 8 and 4 percent of citations respectively.

School administrators and teachers' unions take the blame. When assessing who is at fault for the current state of education, opinions blamed school administrators 30 percent of the time and teachers' unions 26 percent of the time. Parents and students place third and fourth, respectively, in the blame game.

Solving the problem lies in the hands of lawmakers. While those in the school system took the blame, half of all opinions looked to lawmakers and federal agencies for solutions. Lawmakers were cited 31 percent of the time while federal agencies accounted for 19 percent of opinions on reform.

Reform what? In searching for solutions, changes to instructional programs were the most often cited (26 percent of solutions discussed). This coverage included a range of ideas from longer school days and longer school years to more rigorous curricula and efforts to improve teaching materials. Increased funding accounted for 15 percent of solution discussions, forming a natural adjunct to many topics, since everything from longer school years to teacher merit pay to better instructional materials could be tied into the quest for money. Changes in teacher work rules, particularly the abolition of tenure, accounted for another 14% of discussions.

It's not over until the testing says it is. Of all the statistics and data used in education reform discussions, standardized test results were dominant. Standardized test results accounted for 53 percent of the statistics mentioned. This is in keeping both with the demands of NCLB and the overall focus of improving student achievement.

OVERVIEW

This study was designed to gain an understanding of how major and select local media cover the ongoing debates over education reform. As such, it provides an important contextual supplement to the FrameWorks Institute's investigation of how Americans think about education. To provide the widest possible perspective on education reform, this study examined all relevant stories about reforms aimed at the pre-K through high school years, as well as discussions about improving access to higher education.

Research Methods

In order to provide a reliable snapshot of media coverage of education reform, this study examined coverage over a 14-month period, from June 1, 2007, through July 31, 2008. This time period included many months of the presidential primary campaign as well as a short-lived Congressional effort to reauthorize the No Child Left Behind school reform law. While these national events were part of the news coverage in most newspapers, local events and debates constituted the more significant part of coverage.

The news outlets were chosen to provide a broad view of how local and national media address education reform. For the television portion of the national sample, we examined ABC "World News Tonight," CBS "Evening News," CNN, and NBC "Nightly News." Since CNN did not have a regular newscast that was comparable to those on the broadcast networks during the sample period, we chose CNN "American Morning" and "Lou Dobbs Tonight" as the best programs for comparable stories. To round out broadcast coverage, the study also examined coverage on NPR "All things Considered." The nationally prominent print news outlets selected for the study included *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *U.S. News & World Report*, as well as *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*. The sample of local and regional papers was selected from around the country, and included *The Boston Globe*, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Houston Chronicle*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times* and *The Seattle Times*.

These papers were selected for geographic diversity as well as for the different education conditions in each city. For example, in Washington D.C., the recent takeover of the school system by the mayor and his reform-minded chancellor drew attention to a wide range of education reforms. Meanwhile, in Boston (which had been an early adopter of education reforms), discussion hinged on how to revitalize those reforms.

Stories were selected for the study utilizing Lexis/Nexis, Factiva and other databases, applying the following search terms: "education reform," "school reform," "innovative school," "student achievement," "curriculum reform" or "effective school." From the large set of stories recovered using these terms, researchers selected those stories which contained at least two paragraphs of

substantive discussion of education reform. This process eliminated stories that only briefly mentioned education reform and resulted in a sample that was clearly focused on one or more school reform ideas.

FINDINGS

Amount of Coverage

As can be seen in Table 1, the amount of coverage varied widely across the outlets. The *Los Angeles Times* ran the most pieces (72), followed by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (63) and *The Boston Globe* (62). *The Washington Post* (50) and the *Houston Chronicle* (41) round out the top five newspapers. The *Journal-Constitution* printed the largest number of opinion pieces (23) but *The Wall Street Journal* had the largest proportion of opinion pieces (13 opinion pieces out of 17 articles). Coverage in *The Seattle Times* was also notably heavy in opinion pieces (10 out of 16 pieces).

Coverage in news magazines was relatively light, with only 11 stories total. *U.S. News & World Report* led the way with six articles, followed by *Newsweek* (3) and *Time* (2). Because of the small number of magazine stories, all magazine stories will be grouped together in this report. There was also very little coverage of education reform on the broadcast outlets examined. NPR's "All Things Considered" aired three stories, CNN aired two stories and CBS aired one. Neither ABC nor NBC aired any relevant stories. Throughout the remainder of this report, we will group all broadcast stories together.

Despite the large number of opinion pieces in this study, in most respects these pieces made many of the same points found in news coverage. Because of the close parallels between opinion pieces and news coverage, we will present them together in this report except where there are noteworthy differences.

Education reform was rarely front-page news during the study period. There were a total of 18 front-page stories across the nine newspapers in the study. Education reform, however, was a prominent local story, with 60 stories appearing on the front page of the local or metro news section.

Table 1. Amount of Coverage			
	<i>Total</i>	<i>News</i>	<i>Opinion</i>
Los Angeles Times	72	51	21
Atlanta Journal-Constitution	63	40	23
The Boston Globe	62	45	17
The Washington Post	50	43	7
Houston Chronicle	41	38	3
The New York Times	29	20	9
The Wall Street Journal	17	4	13
Chicago Tribune	17	14	3
The Seattle Times	16	6	10
<i>Total Newspapers</i>	<i>367</i>	<i>261</i>	<i>106</i>
U.S. News & World Report	6	5	1
Newsweek	3	2	1
Time	2	1	1
<i>Total Magazines</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>3</i>
NPR “All Things Considered”	3	3	0
ABC	0	0	0
CBS	1	1	0
CNN	2	2	0
NBC	0	0	0
<i>Total Broadcast</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>0</i>
Combined Total	384	275	109

Storytelling Style

As reporters craft their stories, they have several decisions to make about the style in which they present the material in the story. One of those decisions is whether to present education reform as a series of disconnected episodic elements or to present it in a broader thematic context that

draws connections between disparate events. Episodic presentations of school reforms focused on the impact upon, or discussions within, a single school or school system without tying those issues to broader trends in education reform across the country. Thematic presentations attempt to address broader trends or place specific events into a broader reform context.

A majority of stories (54 percent) approached education reform in an episodic fashion, not drawing broader thematic lessons in coverage. Table 2 illustrates the reliance on episodic frames across media outlets.

Newspapers varied considerably in their use of episodic frames. *The Seattle Times* and *The Washington Post* were the most likely to rely on episodic frames, at 69 and 68 percent of stories, respectively. Nearly three out of five stories (59 percent) in the Chicago Tribune used an episodic style in reporting on education reform.

Table 2. Episodic vs. Thematic Frames by Outlet		
	<i>Episodic</i>	<i>Thematic</i>
The Seattle Times	69%	31%
The Washington Post	68%	32%
Chicago Tribune	59%	41%
Los Angeles Times	54%	46%
Houston Chronicle	54%	46%
The Boston Globe	53%	47%
Atlanta Journal-Constitution	51%	49%
The Wall Street Journal	47%	53%
The New York Times	35%	65%
Magazines	18%	82%
Broadcasts	100%	0%

Where episodic stories proved less prevalent, as at *The Wall Street Journal* (47 percent) and *The New York Times* (35 percent), there were often specific reasons for the more contextualized coverage. Since the *Journal* did not cover local events, many of its stories and opinion pieces assessed the state of education in the nation as a whole. In the *Times*, ongoing reforms in New York City schools were frequently discussed in terms of how they were being exported to other school systems or how New York compared to other systems.

The analysis also examined the broad focus of stories about education reform. As can be seen in Table 3, the most common focus was problems and solutions (44 percent). These stories frequently presented the problem of low student achievement or graduation rates and then went on to explore existing or new solutions to the problem. While it is hard to quantify in this analysis, there is an impression that news coverage spent far more time discussing possible solutions than detailing the extent and depth of education problems.

Table 3. Story Focus					
	<i>Problems/ Solutions</i>	<i>Indeterminate Focus</i>	<i>Ongoing Evaluation</i>	<i>Crisis</i>	<i>Innovative Reforms</i>
Overall	44%	29%	20%	5%	3%
Los Angeles Times	50%	25%	19%	3%	3%
Atlanta Journal-Constitution	35%	30%	24%	8%	3%
The Boston Globe	42%	41%	23%	3%	5%
The Washington Post	63%	17%	17%	0%	4%
Houston Chronicle	44%	39%	12%	2%	2%
The New York Times	28%	38%	24%	7%	3%
The Wall Street Journal	41%	41%	12%	0%	6%
Chicago Tribune	35%	29%	24%	12%	0%
The Seattle Times	38%	31%	19%	12%	0%
Magazines	45%	27%	27%	0%	0%
Broadcast	50%	33%	0%	17%	0%

In the next largest group of stories (29 percent), there was no clear focus. An additional one in five stories on education reform focused on an ongoing evaluation of school or student performance. These stories were most often linked to an examination of test scores from state achievement tests or data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test. Some stories discussed the current trend toward monitoring student achievement through a growth model, rather than the more widespread practice of measuring one cohort of students against another cohort the next year.

Overall, only 5 percent of articles focused on a crisis or urgent situation in schools. These stories presented the situation in a particular school system or education in general as one needing urgent remedy, without a significant discussion of possible solutions. Interestingly, attention to innovative reforms accounted for just 3 percent of stories.

As part of setting the stage for education reform discussions, this analysis looked at which locations were discussed as part of education reform. To warrant inclusion, these locations had to be discussed as a part of the problem or solution in education reform. These locations could range from individual classrooms to neighborhoods, entire schools systems and whole states. More than one location could be coded per story if the article addressed multiple locations. There were 148 articles that made no mention of a location, and dealt with reform issues at the broadest level. As can be seen in Table 4, there is a level of abstraction in education reform discussions.

Table 4. Locations Discussed in Relation to Education Reform		
	<i>Number of Mentions</i>	<i>Percent of Mentions</i>
Entire school system	175	74%
Particular state	35	15%
Classrooms	13	6%
Other school facilities	8	3%
Region	5	2%
TOTAL	236	100%

The most commonly mentioned location was the entire school system (175 discussions). Proposed reforms and changes were addressed through their impact on entire school systems and rarely did the discussions reach down to the classroom. Focus on particular states accounted for another 15 percent of discussions. Much of this was tied into the setting of state standards. Classrooms were mentioned in 6 percent of discussions. Other school facilities or general mentions of schools were found in 3 percent of discussions.

Defining Reform

Since this study covers a wide variety of possible education reforms taking place in a large number of school systems across the country, researchers identified how reform was defined in each story. It was possible for a story to define reform in more than one way, since many reform goals are not mutually exclusive.

The definition of education reform proved extremely consistent across media outlets. Almost two-thirds of discussions (65 percent) defined the goal of reform as improving student achievement (see Table 5). In a distant second place was increasing accountability in school

systems (20 percent). These two definitions dominated in large part because they were the goals of the No Child Left Behind law. Many stories put forth both of these goals in order to explain why school systems now face rigorous testing requirements and mandated annual yearly progress targets (AYP). Even though there was not much attention given to the debate over reauthorizing NCLB, the tenets of the law provided the media with a good starting point for assessing America's schools. The annual release of state-by-state test data further bolstered interest in student achievement by providing a ready-made "news hook."

The goal of increasing accountability in schools may have received a boost from the NCLB reauthorization debate. As part of that debate, proposals to change testing requirements or other modifications were quickly rebutted by NCLB supporters as an attempt to weaken the accountability standards of NCLB. Among other things, this had the immediate effect of briefly increasing the number of stories published in the media about education reform.

Table 5. Defining the Goals of Reform Efforts					
	<i>Improving Achievement</i>	<i>Increased Accountability</i>	<i>Close Racial Gap</i>	<i>Return Arts</i>	<i>America Competitive</i>
Overall	65%	20%	12%	1%	<1%
Los Angeles Times	61%	21%	14%	0%	0%
The Boston Globe	67%	20%	11%	0%	0%
Atlanta Journal-Constitution	72%	21%	5%	2%	0%
The Washington Post	55%	21%	17%	0%	0%
Houston Chronicle	59%	26%	13%	2%	0%
The New York Times	71%	21%	7%	0%	0%
The Wall Street Journal	65%	10%	20%	0%	5%
Chicago Tribune	73%	13%	7%	7%	0%
The Seattle Times	77%	18%	6%	0%	0%
Magazines	63%	13%	19%	0%	0%
Broadcast	66%	34%	0%	0%	0%

The idea that education reforms should aim to close the achievement gap between white students and minority students was found in 12 percent of discussions. These stories often noted the lingering gap between white and some minority students that remains a major problem, even for school systems that are making good progress in complying with NCLB standards. Such goals as returning the arts to public school curricula (1 percent) and keeping America competitive (<1 percent) were a rare part of coverage.

Resources for Reform

Having defined what education reform meant in the media, the analysis next looked for discussions of the resources perceived to be available to the education system. These discussions included mention of such specific resources as money, teacher or principal training, gifted and talented programs, improved facilities, etc. Table 6 provides an overview of the resource discussions.

Money was by far and away the most discussed resource (150 mentions), with no other resource garnering even half the attention. Combining news coverage that talked about how inadequate budgets were with news coverage that talked about school budgets as inadequate but improving, we find that a majority of news coverage (54 percent) leaned towards a presentation of budgets as fairly inadequate. An additional 43 percent merely mentioned that money was a resource for education.

Table 6. Educational Resources Discussed					
	<i>Number of Opinions</i>	<i>Unspecified</i>	<i>Inadequate</i>	<i>Inadequate, but improving</i>	<i>Adequate</i>
Money	150	43%	33%	21%	3%
Teacher training	61	44%	26%	21%	8%
Additional tutoring	34	79%	0%	21%	0%
School facilities	24	29%	71%	0%	0%
Business partnerships	21	76%	24%	0%	0%
Principal training	20	35%	30%	35%	0%
Political power	16	69%	31%	0%	0%
Special education	9	44%	56%	0%	0%
Instructional equipment	8	38%	0%	0%	62%
Gifted/talented programs	8	100%	0%	0%	0%
AP programs	7	71%	0%	29%	0%
IB program	7	100%	0%	0%	0%
Time with teacher	5	0%	0%	0%	100%
Single-gender classes	1	100%	0%	0%	0%

In a distant second place came discussions about teacher training (61 mentions). The sample period included numerous studies and reports outlining the need for many more teachers to replace those who retire and quit as well as the need to improve teacher training. Both of these threads contained mentions of teacher training as a major resource in education improvement.

In third place came discussions of additional tutoring as a resource (34 mentions). Good school facilities (24) and partnerships with local or national businesses (21) round out the top five resources mentioned. Assessments of current school facilities were overwhelmingly negative (71 percent), since most of these discussions focused on overcrowded, aging urban schools. The idea of forming partnerships with businesses to fund school programs or expand opportunities remains a new development in public education. Perhaps because of this novelty, most mentions of partnerships registered no opinion or found them still inadequate to meet current needs.

Principal training and political power were the only other resources to receive more than 10 mentions. In Washington, D.C., and other cities undergoing major school reforms, principals were often found to be inadequate for the expanded responsibilities of school reform. Almost two-thirds of opinions (65 percent) found principal training either wholly inadequate or inadequate with some signs of improvement. Political power was a nebulous resource (16 mentions) that often went unassessed.

In a separate piece of the analysis, researchers coded which people or groups were identified as significant actors in the education system. To be a significant actor, the individual or group had to be substantively discussed in at least two paragraphs in the story. These actors can be seen as yet another type of resource for the education system. Despite the fact that education, and especially education reform, is all about improving student achievement, students play a small role in media coverage.

As can be seen in Table 7, it is teachers followed by other adults in the system who are the focus of attention. There were 134 extensive discussions of teachers, almost double the presence of any other actor. Non-profit groups were discussed 89 times. The non-profit world ranged from groups that recruit and train teachers and principals to those that provide scholarships to private schools to those working to improve school facilities to groups that mentor and tutor minority students. School administrators other than the superintendent were discussed 75 times, with school superintendents following close behind (62 discussions). Discussions of “lawmakers” or politicians rounded out the top five with 53 appearances. Education experts were discussed 51 times, supplying perspective and information on almost every aspect of education. Federal agencies, particularly the Department of Education, appeared 47 times — often as a result of Secretary Spellings’ campaign for the NCLB statute.

Rounding out the top ten actors were state government officials (31 discussions), teachers’ unions (27) and principals (23). State government officials were most often discussed in relation to state standards and activities to improve student scores. Teachers’ unions appeared in many discussions ranging from merit pay for teachers to debates over tenure to questions of teacher competency. School principals were not often a major player, usually taking a major role only when they had succeeded in turning a “bad” school around.

Table 7. Extensively Discussed Educational Actors		
	<i>Number of Mentions</i>	<i>Percent of Mentions</i>
Teachers	134	20%
Non-profit groups	89	13%
School administrators	75	11%
School superintendents	62	9%
“Lawmakers” or “politicians”	53	8%
Education experts	51	8%
Federal agencies	47	7%
State government	31	5%
Teachers’ unions	27	4%
School principals	23	4%
Local government	20	3%
School boards	18	3%
Parents	14	2%
Students	11	2%
All others	7	1%
TOTAL	662	100%

Students and parents are minor actors (even though they may have been mentioned or had brief quotes in numerous stories). For example, there are many stories that discuss student test scores, but these discussions usually hinge on issues like teacher quality, curricula quality or other actors and not on students. For the media, covering education reform meant reporting on what adults were doing on the outside of the proverbial “black box” of student learning, with only minimal attempts to understand what is happening inside the box.

Sources

Identifying players or actors in educational reform tells a great deal about the perceived locus of change. It is also interesting to note which sources are most frequently cited or quoted in the news as a compounding or contesting force or simply because of the potential for news access. As can be seen from Table 8, school administrators were the most frequent sources.

Table 8. Sources Cited		
	<i>Number of Mentions</i>	<i>Percent of Mentions</i>
School Administrators	172	18%
Non-profit organizations	160	17%
Experts	142	15%
Teachers	103	11%
Students	76	8%
Principals	66	7%
Federal government	55	6%
Elected officials	47	5%
Parents	40	4%
Teacher/principal unions	33	3%
State government	30	3%
Local government	26	3%
School board members	11	1%
Businesses	5	<1%
TOTAL	966	100%

Overall, school administrators were cited 172 times, including 55 citations of school superintendents. It is important to recognize that this is a very diverse group, including such prominent reform-minded superintendents as Joel Klein in New York and Michelle Rhee in D.C., as well as many others superintendents managing school systems around the country.

In a close second place were non-profit organizations (160 mentions). This category represents the wide range of groups identified as education players. In third place came a variety of education experts (142 citations). Some of these experts had recently released studies that were covered in the press, while others were sought after to comment on proposed reforms or other education problems. Teachers were the only other group to be cited more than one hundred times

(103 citations).

Students came in fifth place (76 mentions), giving them a higher profile as sources than actors in education reform. Students were asked to comment on both the current conditions in schools as well as proposed reforms. Principals were cited 66 times while federal officials (most often from the Department of Education) were cited 55 times. Elected officials whose precise role in government was not identified made 47 appearances, while parents were cited 40 times. Teachers' or principals' unions rounded out the top 10 sources with 33 citations.

Why Reform?

From these broad measures of stories, as recounted in the preceding pages, we move on to specific arguments surrounding school reform. The best place to begin this examination is with specific rationales that were advanced in media to justify one or more educational reform ideas. These opinions are based on explicit statements in the story that provide a clear reason for action. Such statements most often come from sources in the story or the author of an opinion piece and occasionally the reporter of a news story. More than one rationale could be advanced in a story and some stories offered several rationales for action. Stories that covered existing programs or efforts did not usually offer a rationale for reform, since such stories were not addressing new proposals.

Among the 258 opinions, we found that one rationale stood out well above the others: a desire to improve student achievement (94 opinions). This rationale accounted for 36 percent of all rationales offered (see Table 9). Once again, this reflected the initial goals of the NCLB act as well as many other reform efforts launched before NCLB. In a distant second place was a desire to improve institutional effectiveness (34 opinions). These rationales were often advanced by teachers, principals and administrators who wanted to enact reforms that, they argued, would help them do a better job.

Following close behind was the rationale that reforming education would reduce inequities in society (33 opinions). During the presidential campaign, a coalition of education and civil rights leaders made news advancing this argument. Many news outlets ran stories on the activities of the coalition, since the group appeared to have drawn together liberals and conservatives in unexpected ways.

Creating a productive citizenry was seen as a rationale 24 times. That was followed by two closely related arguments: maintaining global competitiveness (22 opinions) and maintaining prosperity (20). Arguments that reforming education was "the right thing to do" were found 15 times, while arguments for self interest appeared only twice.

Table 9. Rationales for Reform		
	<i>Number of Opinions</i>	<i>Percent of Opinions</i>
Improve student achievement	94	36%
Improve institutional effectiveness	34	13%
Reduce inequities in society	33	13%
Create productive citizens	24	9%
Maintain global competitiveness	22	9%
Maintain prosperity	20	8%
Moral necessity/“right thing to do”	15	6%
Self interest	2	1%

Consequences

Another way to examine the rationales for reform is to look at who or which groups are seen to suffer the consequences of failing to successfully reform America’s schools. There was limited direct discussion of the consequences of failure. An implicit sense of the importance of education reform can be found in many articles, but overt discussions of who suffers the consequences occurred 51 times (see Table 10).

Table 10. Who Pays the Consequences?		
	<i>Number of Mentions</i>	<i>Percent of Mentions</i>
Individual students	42	81%
Families	9	19%

As such, discussions of the consequences of education reform were overwhelmingly focused on individual students. The plight of individual students accounted for 81 percent of consequence discussions. The remaining 19 percent addressed the plight of families.

Who Is To Blame?

As with any public policy debate, there was an effort made to assess blame for the current poor state of education, particularly in large urban school systems. This analysis identified explicit opinions from sources or reporters about who was to blame, as shown in Table 11.

Table 11. Who Is To Blame for Educational Failures		
	<i>Number of Opinions</i>	<i>Percent of Opinions</i>
School administrators	43	30%
Teachers unions	38	26%
Parents	18	12%
Students	16	11%
Principals	12	8%
School boards	9	6%
Teachers	6	4%
Politicians	3	2%
Federal government	1	1%

The most common targets of blame were school administrators (43 opinions), who were typically faulted for excessive bureaucracy, turf battles and a lack of creative thinking, among other things. Following close behind were teachers' unions, which were blamed about a quarter of the time. Most commonly, teachers' unions were portrayed as obstructionist when they defended tenure, rejected merit pay systems based on student test scores and generally advocated for work rules that ran counter to the ambitions of reformers.

Far less frequently, parents were held responsible for failures in education (18 opinions). In these stories, parents were faulted for a wide variety of things, including failing to support or supervise their children's homework, for not availing themselves of existing resources like tutors, and for not supporting education through bond issue votes or other political actions. Students fell in line right behind their parents (16 opinions). Criticism of students addressed their lack of attention to school and violent and disruptive behavior, among other problems. Taken together, parents and students comprise roughly another quarter of blame. School principals were the only other group to be held responsible more than 10 times. Interestingly, teachers as individuals in the classroom were rarely seen as the source of the problem (6 opinions).

Who Should Solve the Problem

The flip side of the blame game is assessing who should solve the problem. Our analysis identified 155 explicit opinions about who should solve educational problems. Table 12 provides a breakdown of opinions on who bears responsibility for solving the problem.

Table 12. Who Should Solve Education Problems		
	<i>Number of Opinions</i>	<i>Percent of Opinions</i>
Politicians	48	31%
Federal government	29	19%
School administrators	26	17%
Parents	18	12%
Students	16	10%
Principals	12	8%
Community leaders	5	3%
Teachers' unions	1	1%

Given the debate over reauthorizing or administratively modifying the NCLB law, it is not surprising that politicians and the federal government were the No. 1 and No. 2 most widely referenced actors urged to solve the problems (48 and 29 opinions, respectively). Thus, when combined, government actors above the school level constitute 50 percent of the problem-solvers. School administrators placed third with 26 opinions. Following administrators were parents (with 18 opinions) and students (with 16 opinions).

Solutions

While there was limited discussion of who was to blame for educational problems and who should solve them, there were over 1,000 opinions on what should be done to fix the education system. Because of the scope of possible reforms and the numerous variations that can arise in multiple school systems and to support greater clarity of analysis, the researchers grouped proposed solutions into broad categories that may also mask subtle distinctions. Table 13 provides a breakdown of the 1,141 opinions on possible solutions.

Changes to instructional processes were the most frequently discussed solution, with 297 opinions. These changes included proposals to lengthen the school day — particularly for schools that were failing to make the annual progress reports that the federal government now

requires of school districts (called Adequate Yearly Progress) — as well as other changes to make instruction more interesting, more individualized and more interactive.

Table 13. Proposed Solutions		
	<i>Number of Opinions</i>	<i>Percent of Opinions</i>
Changes to instruction	297	26%
Increases in financial support	169	15%
Changes in teacher work	157	14%
Modify NCLB	114	10%
Educator training	106	9%
New programs	104	9%
Toughen testing standards	70	6%
Eliminate NCLB	52	5%
Facility improvements	47	4%
Vouchers	20	2%
Adult education	5	<1%

Recommendations to increase financial support, whether through increased budgetary allocations, foundation grants or corporate contributions, placed second (169 opinions). Calls for more funding sometimes went hand in hand with other reforms, since many reforms would require money to pay for changes. Proposals to change teacher work rules or processes were the subject of 157 opinions. This included things like the abolition of tenure, merit pay based in some way on student achievement, changes in teacher work rules and allowing local schools more control over staffing decisions.

Suggestions to modify NCLB in one or more ways placed fourth, with 114 opinions. This is a very broad category that includes everything from changing the way AYP is calculated to changes in which groups must be tested to changing AYP target dates. Undoubtedly, if the reauthorization battle had gone forward, this raft of changes would have received even more attention. This serves as yet another reminder of the degree to which NCLB has effectively served as an organizing principle for storylines pursued in news. Rounding out the top five solutions were recommendations to improve or expand educator training (106 opinions). This included calls to improve teacher training, as well as increasing principal training.

The only other proposed solution to garner more than 100 mentions were calls for some type of new program not covered elsewhere (104 opinions). With all the discussion of standards, there

were 70 calls to toughen testing standards. Some of these were aimed at particular states like Illinois or Mississippi whose standards were widely considered to be too low. Other opinions pushed for tougher standards in general or even national standards that would attempt to make achievement across state lines more comparable. Calls to eliminate or drastically curtail NCLB provisions were found 52 times. Such discussions were short-lived when reauthorization was dropped.

Costs

There was a fair amount of discussion in media about the costs of education reform (53 opinions). News accounts were overwhelmingly focused on the monetary costs of education reform (see Table 14).

Table 14. Costs of Education Reform		
	<i>Number of Mentions</i>	<i>Percent of Mentions</i>
Monetary	32	60%
Human	14	26%
Jobs/markets	6	11%
Societal	1	2%
TOTAL	53	100%

The monetary costs of education reform accounted for 60 percent of all costs mentioned. Given the attention to costly reforms like merit pay for teachers, longer school days and smaller class sizes — coupled with mounting evidence that the economy was heading into recession — the attention to money is not surprising. By contrast, the human costs of education reform accounted for 26 percent of cost discussions. Importantly, most of these discussions revolved around how the roles of teachers and administrators would change under many reforms. Jobs and markets were cited in 11 percent of cost discussions while societal costs accounted for only 2 percent of all coverage.

Statistics Cited in Education Reform Stories

As a final part of the analysis, researchers looked for any mentions of statistics used to inform the readers' understanding of education reform. Given the heavy focus on improving student achievement, it is no surprise that the most commonly referenced statistic in education coverage were state-sponsored achievement test scores (see Table 15).

Table 15. Statistics Cited		
	<i>Number of Mentions</i>	<i>Percent of Mentions</i>
State achievement tests	140	53%
High school graduation rates	48	18%
Other standardized tests	29	11%
Number/percentage of schools making AYP	19	7%
College placement rates	10	4%
Percent achieving regular yearly promotion	7	3%
Minority graduation rates	5	2%
Percent achieving passing grades	3	1%
Percent of students in advanced classes	3	1%
Percent of minority students in advanced classes	1	<1%
TOTAL	265	100%

The fact that every state is required to publish test results only added to the coverage given to standardized tests. Over half (53 percent) of all statistics mentioned were standardized achievement tests. Statistics on high school graduation rates came in a distant second, with 18 percent of mentions. Data from other standardized tests such as the SAT and NAEP garnered 11 percent of mentions. The number or percentage of schools making adequate yearly progress as required by NCLB was mentioned in 7 percent of discussions. Statistics on college placement rates rounded out the top five statistics in the news with 4 percent of mentions.

No other statistics received more than seven mentions. The percentage of students in a school or school system who achieved regular yearly promotion was mentioned in 3 percent of statistical discussions. Minority graduation rates accounted for 2 percent of statistics mentioned. The percentage of students achieving passing grades and the percentage of students in advanced classes each accounted for 1 percent of statistical mentions. The percentage of minority students in advanced classes appeared in less than one percent of statistics mentioned.

Conclusions

While education reform has remained a potent political issue for many years, it would take an avid newspaper reader to find coverage of various school reform ideas. During the 14-month period examined in this study, television news and the newsmagazines ran only 17 pieces on

education reform. The dominance of newspapers in covering education reform has a direct impact on the nature of coverage. While discussions from the Presidential campaign trail and efforts to reauthorize NCLB entered into coverage, reports were overwhelmingly focused on local events, concerns and actors.

A focus on local concerns did not mean a necessarily narrow view of reform. Episodic coverage narrowly edged out more thematic coverage of education reform. This pattern is reflective of efforts made to compare reforms across school systems or explore how well reforms are working in other locations before implementation at the local level. In general, coverage was also very focused on identifying problems and possible solutions. While no one proclaimed to have found a solution to America's education problems, only 5 percent of stories presented the situation as a crisis. A plurality of stories (44 percent) explored problems and solutions, while the remainder had either an indeterminate focus or presented ongoing information about school performance.

While there were many possible solutions discussed, nearly two-thirds of the time (65 percent) education reform was defined as improving student achievement. The clear focus on student achievement is most likely an outgrowth of provisions of NCLB. In far distant second place were calls to increase accountability in school systems (20 percent). There was very little attention paid to such goals as returning arts to the curriculum. A similar pattern held true when we looked at the rationales advanced to justify education reform. The most common rationale was the need to improve student achievement (36 percent of discussions).

"Money makes the world go around" is the old saying, and that was certainly true in education reform coverage. Money was the most commonly discussed resource in the education reform debate, since everything from merit pay for teachers to longer school days to smaller class sizes required more money. When we looked at the ways the costs of education reform are framed, the overwhelming answer was in terms of money. Three out of five discussions framed reform costs in terms of money.

Despite the obvious role that students and parents play in the education process, they are relatively minor players in most education reform coverage. When news accounts identified the actors who have a role in education reform, parents and students account for just 2 percent of discussions apiece. Most often, students and parents appear in stories reacting to reform efforts and playing more of a spectator role. That role is reflected in the finding that students and parents are slightly more prominent as sources in the news than as actors. Students account for 8 percent of sources while parents represent another 4 percent.

There was plenty of blame for America's education problems and the two leading targets were school administrators and teachers' unions. With an eye on "bloated" bureaucracies, poor procurement and accounting systems and little accountability, school administrators were blamed 30 percent of the time. Teacher union wage demands, work rules and protection of seniority systems took the blame 26 percent of the time. Parents and students place third and fourth in the blame game — carving out a place just behind teachers' unions.

While those in the school system took the blame, half of all opinions turned to lawmakers and federal agencies for solutions. State and federal lawmakers were cited in 31 percent of calls to act on reforms. Some of this attention was certainly linked to the short-lived effort to reauthorize NCLB, but there was also attention given to various reform efforts working their way through state legislatures. Federal agencies, most often the Department of Education, accounted for 19 percent of opinion on who should take action. These discussions generally revolved around how DOE was implementing NCLB guidelines and requirements.

When attention turned to what should be done about education, there were numerous options. The most common choices could be broadly described as changes to instructional programs, which accounted for over one-quarter of discussions (26 percent). There were many ideas in this category, ranging from longer school days to more rigorous curricula requirements to improving the teaching materials themselves. Once again, money plays a prominent role in solutions. Increased funding for everything from merit pay for teachers to better instructional materials and smaller classes accounted for 15 percent of solution discussions. Following close behind the quest for money were calls to change teacher work rules, particularly the granting of tenure (14 percent of discussions).

Given the strong focus on improving student achievement and the strong testing requirements of NCLB, it should not be surprising that standardized test results were the most commonly mentioned piece of data in the debate. Standardized tests score accounted for over half (53 percent) of all statistics mentioned.

By and large, media coverage of education reform paints a picture of reformers aimed at improving student achievement by changing the educational bureaucracy while limited by school budgets and resources, all in pursuit of demonstrable results on standardized tests. Students and parents are often reduced to a spectator role and goals other than higher test scores are generally given little attention.

About the Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA): CMPA is a nonpartisan research and educational organization which conducts scientific studies of news and entertainment media. CMPA's goal is to provide an empirical basis for ongoing debates over media coverage and impact through well-documented, timely and readable studies. Since its formation in 1985, CMPA has emerged as a unique institution that bridges the gap between academic research and the broader domains of media and public policy. Our scientific approach sets us apart from self-appointed media "watchdog" groups, while our timeliness and outreach distinguish us from traditional academic researchers. Since 2004, CMPA has been an affiliate of the George Mason University, where CMPA President Dr. Robert Lichter serves as Professor of Communication.

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