

25

YEARS OF EDUCATION COVERAGE



LEADING THE NEWS:
25 YEARS OF EDUCATION
COVERAGE

HOW LOCAL, REGIONAL AND STATE NEWS SOURCES
COVER EDUCATION AND SCHOOLS.

Leading the News: 25 Years of Education Coverage

How local, regional and state news sources cover education and schools.

By Andrew Campanella

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Contents

Introduction	4
Executive Summary	5
Analyzing the Data	6
Finding 1: Local News Outlets Cover Education the Most	7
Finding 2: Local Coverage of Education is on the Rise	8
Finding 3: Sports, Events and Money Get the Most Coverage	9
Finding 4: Education Policy Coverage Is on the Decline	10
Finding 5: Education Funding and School Choice Remain the Most-Covered Policies	11
Conclusion	16
About the Author	17
Appendix	18



Leading the News: 25 Years of Education Coverage

Andrew R. Campanella
June 2015

Introduction

In 2014, **4 percent** of Americans said that education was the “most important problem facing the U.S.,” according to a Gallup survey.

Americans expressed greater concern about government inaction, the economy, unemployment, healthcare, immigration, the national debt, and “moral decline” than they did about our schools.

For sure, 4 percent does not seem like a big number. But what make the number notable are the topics that Americans consider *less important* than education.

More Americans are concerned about the quality of education than they are about poverty, foreign policy, terrorism, national security, race relations, the judicial system, and income inequality.

But is education, a topic that tens of millions of Americans count as the single biggest problem facing our nation, receiving ample coverage in the news media?

Is education coverage declining? Are reporters at the local and regional levels more likely to cover education policy than national-level reporters? Have newsroom cutbacks impacted education coverage? What education

policy issues generate the most news stories? And what education policies are getting more coverage now than ever before?

These are questions I have heard school officials, education policy leaders, and legislators ask many times throughout my 10-year career in education-related communications, research and public policy.

But surprisingly, there has not been much research to provide many answers. And these answers are important. After all, to promote education-related stories to the media, it is helpful to know what types of stories are most likely to generate coverage.

So, out of basic curiosity, I decided to pursue this project.

The goal of this report is not to critique the news media, or to render judgment on the tone or tenor of education coverage. It is simply to provide basic data and answers, objective information that will, hopefully, allow educators and education policy professionals the opportunity to maximize their work and collaboration with reporters, producers, and journalists.

Executive Summary

A review and analysis of more than 5,000 news sources over the past 25 years revealed the following five key findings related to K-12 education-focused news coverage:

- Local, regional, and state media outlets are **three times more likely to cover K-12 education** and schools than national media outlets.
- Coverage of education and schools was up **7.7 percent in 2014** – in local, regional, and state-level news outlets – over the topic’s 25-year coverage average, despite an unprecedented downturn in the news industry.
- Nearly one quarter of all news stories about K-12 education mentions **sports, events at schools, or education funding**.
- Coverage of education policy issues has steadily declined over time. In 2014, policy-oriented coverage was down **36.1 percent** over the 25-year coverage average for policy stories.
- The two policies that generated the most coverage in 2014, and have consistently garnered the highest percentage of coverage over the past 25 years, are education funding/spending and school choice.



Local, regional, and state media outlets are three times more likely to cover K-12 education and schools than national media outlets.

Analyzing the Data

In analyzing news coverage for this report, NewsBank was used to search for key terms in headlines and story leads. NewsBank provides one of the most thorough archives of news stories over a long period of time. For the purposes of this study, more than 5,000 local, regional and statewide news sources, in a custom list, were used to compile data. The following methodological rules have guided this analysis, and should be kept in mind when reading this report.

This is an analysis of local, regional, and state-level news outlets.

This report analyzes local, regional, and statewide news media coverage of K-12 education and schools. News coverage is defined as articles that were printed in local, regional, or state newspapers, or transcripts of local, regional, and state television station broadcasts. Searches of news stories were filtered to exclude terminology, in lead paragraphs and headlines, related to higher education.

Only real news counts.

Press releases, news releases, and paid content – such as advertising – was excluded from all searches, so that only news generated by reporters, editors and producers was considered for analysis.

The percentage of coverage is analyzed, not the total amount of coverage.

Instead of analyzing the *number* of education stories per year, this analysis focuses on the *percentage* of news stories about education, in relation to the total number of news stories developed on all topics. Because the archiving of news articles has changed dramatically over the last 25 years, any long-term analysis of the total number of education stories would lead to inaccurate conclusions about trends.

Today's coverage is compared to a 25-year average, not to a fixed point in time.

When looking at coverage trends, this analysis seeks to provide answers to the basic question: how is education coverage today different, or similar, than it has been in the past? Instead of comparing data from 2014 to data from the year 1990, we instead compare data from 2014 to the average percentage, over 25 years, of coverage for each topic and subtopic being evaluated. This is referred to as the “25-year coverage average.” This allows for a better gauge of trends and shifts over the years, rather than a simple date-to-date comparison.

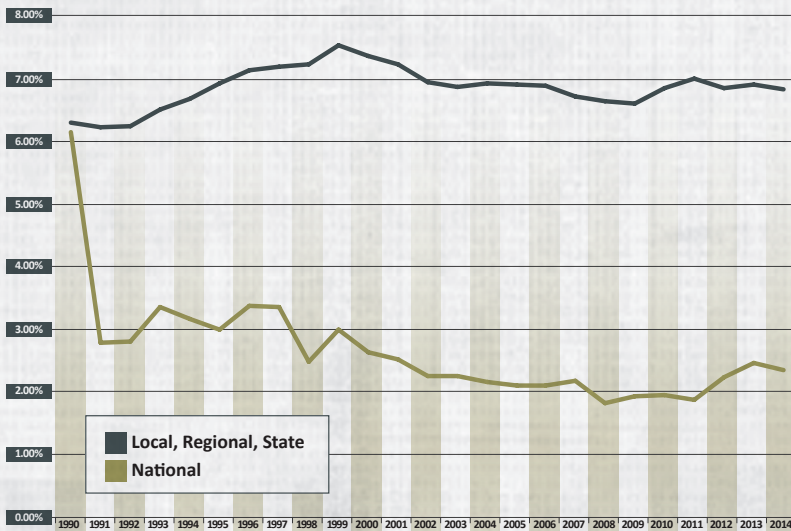
Finding 1: Local News Outlets Cover Education the Most

Where do Americans go to get news and information – that they trust – about schools and education?

Local news sources.

In 2014, **6.82 percent** of local, regional, and state-level news coverage featured K-12 education or schools.

Comparatively, among national-level news sources, about **2.3 percent** of all stories focused on K-12 education or schools.



The local, regional, and state-level news sources that deliver education coverage to Americans are also among the most relied upon, and most trusted, news sources in the country.

Despite an abundance on online news sources and the increased popularity of 24-hour cable television news, the highest percentage of American news consumers – more than 80 percent – get most of their news from local television, more than 30 percentage points higher than online-only news sources.¹

Moreover, according to the Pew Research Center, 69 percent of Americans say they have “a lot” or “some” trust in local news organizations, 10 percentage points higher than national news organizations and 22 percentage points higher than Congress.²

1. American Press Institute, “How Americans get their news,” March 17, 2014

2. Pew Research Center, “Press Widely Criticized, But Trusted More than Other Information Sources,” September 22, 2011



In 2014, 6.82 percent of local, regional, and state-level news coverage featured K-12 education or schools.

Finding 2: Local Coverage of Education Is on the Rise

Despite public confidence in local, regional, and statewide news sources, the news business has experienced significant difficulties over the past decade and a half.

An imperfect storm of financial challenges in the news industry, the growth of new technologies, and the global financial recession has wreaked havoc on newsrooms across the country.

An analysis by the American Enterprise Institute found that newspaper advertising revenues have, in inflation-adjusted dollars, reached a 62-year low – and that advertising revenues for newspapers are down 50 percent over five years.³

This lack of cash has decimated reporting teams and newsroom staffs at papers across the country.

According to Pew, newspapers experienced a 30 percent decrease in personnel from 2000-2012. Papers were “below 40,000 full-time professional employees for the first time since 1978.”⁴

While slightly insulated, television isn’t immune to the challenges faced by newspapers. Cutbacks have also hit local television news, to the point where 40 percent of local news airtime is now dedicated to sports, weather and traffic.⁵

And yet, regardless of one of the worst climates for the news industry in decades – education coverage has not suffered at the local, regional, or state levels.

In fact, in 2014, the share of K-12 related headlines in local, education stories in regional and state news sources was up **7.7 percent** over the average percentage of coverage for the past 25 years.

3. American Enterprise Institute, “Creative destruction: Newspaper ad revenue has gone into a precipitous free fall, and it’s probably not over yet,” by Mark J. Perry, August 6, 2013

4. Pew Research Center, “State of the News Media 2013” - Overview

5. Pew Research Center, “State of the News Media 2013” – The Changing TV News Landscape

Finding 3: Sports, Events and Money Get the Most Coverage

Local, regional, and state-level education coverage has survived the storm that has ravaged the news business. But what education topics receive coverage – and what topics get ignored?

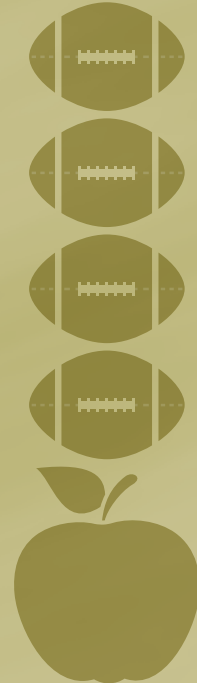
From 2010-2014, the topic with the highest percentage of mentions in education-related story leads is, by far, sports. Approximately **13.6 percent** of local, regional, and state education coverage focuses on athletics.

Following sports, special events – everything from pep rallies to open houses and field trips – are mentioned prominently in just over **5 percent** of education news stories.

Education funding is also a frequently-mentioned topic, with discussions of spending and budgets featuring prominently in about **5 percent** of stories.

Topic	Percentage
Sports	13.63%
Special Events	5.09%
Funding	5.00%
Academic Subjects	4.65%
Clubs and Activities	4.10%
Music and Arts	3.51%
Other Policies (Not Including Funding)	2.69%
Elections	2.55%
Food/Meals	2.22%
Transportation	2.13%
Awards	2.05%
Crime	1.92%
Weather	1.60%

In terms of the groups of people mentioned in education stories, students lead the pack. Students were mentioned in **62 percent** of education-related articles, while administrators were mentioned in **42.7 percent** of the stories. Parents and teachers were mentioned in **23.5 percent**, and **28.3 percent** of the stories, respectively.



There are four times more stories about sports than about education policies, not including funding.



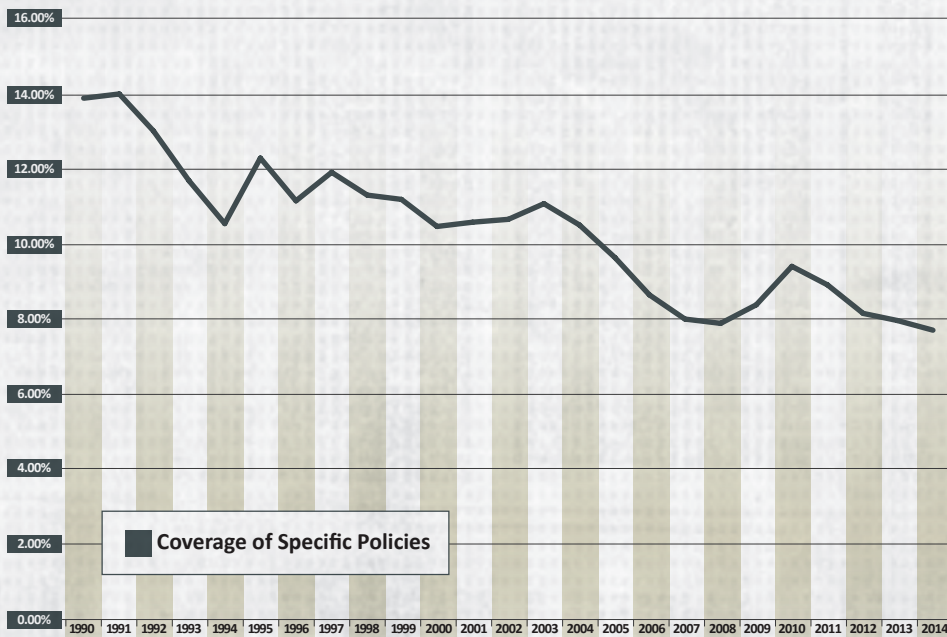
Finding 4: Education Policy Coverage Is on the Decline

Stories about education policy are almost always about *specific policies*, rather than education policy in general.

In fact, in 2014, there were 30 times more stories about *specific* education policies than there were about education policy in general. *Generic* education policy stories made up less than one quarter of one percent of all local, regional, and state-level education coverage.

Meanwhile, coverage of specific policies – such as school choice, teacher quality, funding, standards and student achievement – accounted for **7.5 percent** of all local, regional and state-level K-12 education coverage in 2014.

However, coverage of policy – even specific policies – is declining. In 2014, policy coverage was down **36.1 percent** over the 25-year coverage average.



Finding 5: Education Funding and School Choice Remain the Most-Covered Policies

From 1990 to 2014, the two education policy issues that consistently received the most significant coverage were **education funding** and **school choice**.

In 2014, these two topics receive two and a half times more coverage than the amount of coverage received by an additional 10 education policy issues combined. In 2014, funding and/or spending was mentioned in just over **5 percent** of all education-related coverage, while school choice was mentioned in **2.25 percent** of coverage.

Policy	2014	25-Year Coverage Average	Difference
Funding and Spending	5.04%	8.25%	-63.57%
School Choice	2.25%	2.09%	6.94%
Testing	0.43%	0.48%	-13.18%
Federal Programs	0.19%	0.38%	-102.71%
Student Achievement	0.29%	0.37%	-29.48%
Safety	0.46%	0.34%	25.52%
Accountability	0.23%	0.25%	-9.09%
Class sizes	0.12%	0.24%	-97.39%
Standards	0.24%	0.18%	25.35%
Teacher Issues	0.11%	0.13%	-24.09%
Quality of Schools in General	0.08%	0.12%	-46.66%

In addition to funding and school choice, the issues of federal programs, school safety, testing, and student achievement have consistently ranked in the top five most-covered education policy issues.

Rank of Top 10 Most-Covered Issues	In 2014	Over the Last 5 Years	Over 25 Years
1	Funding and Spending	Funding and Spending	Funding and Spending
2	School Choice	School Choice	School Choice
3	Safety	Safety	Testing
4	Testing	Federal Programs	Federal Programs
5	Student Achievement	Testing	Student Achievement
6	Standards	Student Achievement	Safety
7	Accountability	Accountability	Accountability
8	Federal Programs	Class sizes	Class sizes
9	Class sizes	Standards	Standards
10	Teacher issues	Teacher Issues	Teacher Issues



From 1990 to 2014, the two education policy issues that consistently received the most significant coverage were education funding and school choice.

Topics on the Rise

School Safety: Prominent mentions of school safety in education news coverage has grown remarkably over the past 25 years. While not always covered as a policy issue, safety and school violence coverage is included in this analysis because of the topic's implications on other policies.

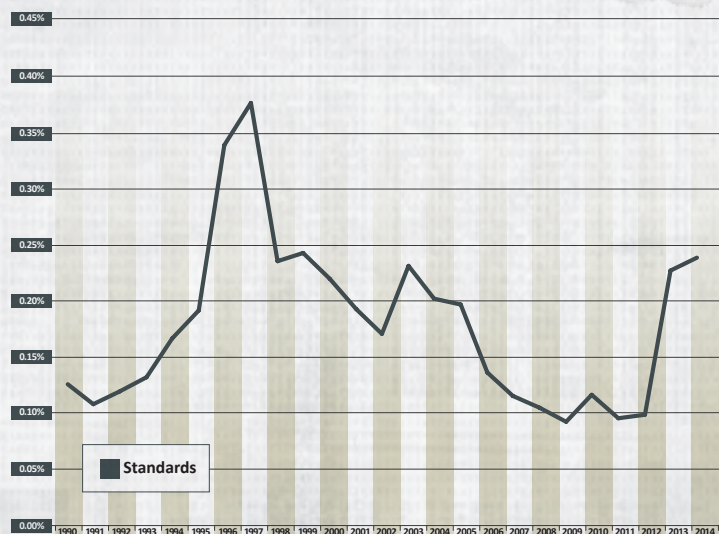
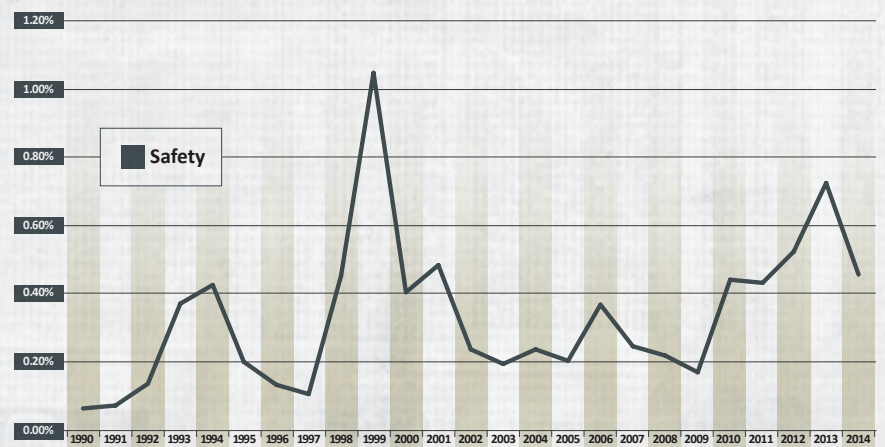
In 1990, school safety received a smaller percentage of coverage than any of the other policy topics evaluated in this report. In 2014, safety was – after funding and school choice, of course – the most-mentioned issue. Mentions of school safety, in 2014, were up **25.5 percent** over the 25-year coverage average for the topic.

Local, regional, and statewide coverage of school safety spikes dramatically after specific incidents – such as the Columbine tragedy in 1998, the Sandy Hook shooting in 2013, and the more-recent rise of “bullying” as a prominent topic of discussion. Notably, in 1998, coverage of school safety accounted for more than 1 percent of all education coverage in local, regional and state news sources.

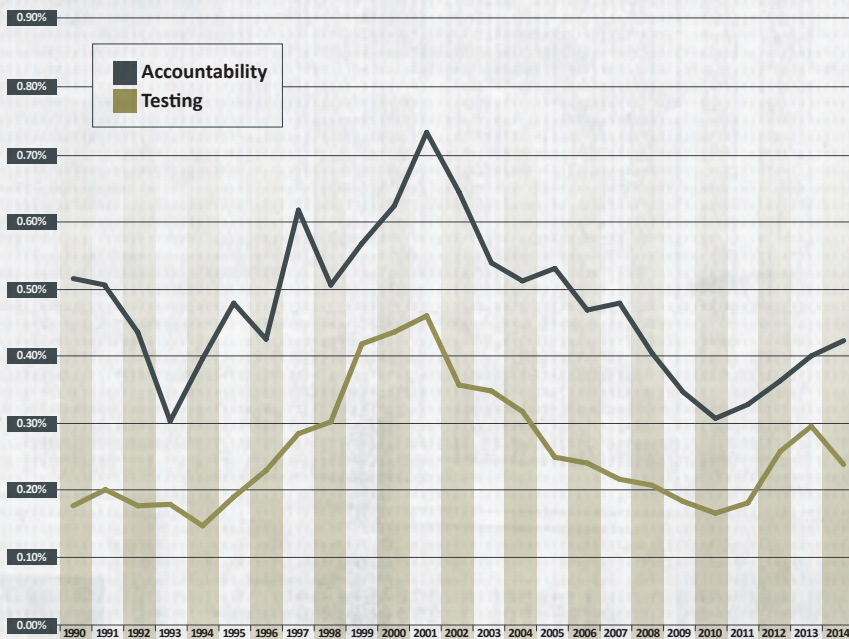
Standards: Coverage of state education standards is increasing significantly and, given the current discussion over Common Core, is likely to increase even more dramatically in the years ahead.

Coverage of standards has nearly doubled from 1990 to 2014, and is up **25.3 percent** over the 25-year coverage average. In 2014, standards received more coverage than at any other time since 1999.

Testing coverage, and coverage of accountability – two topics frequently associated with standards – have also



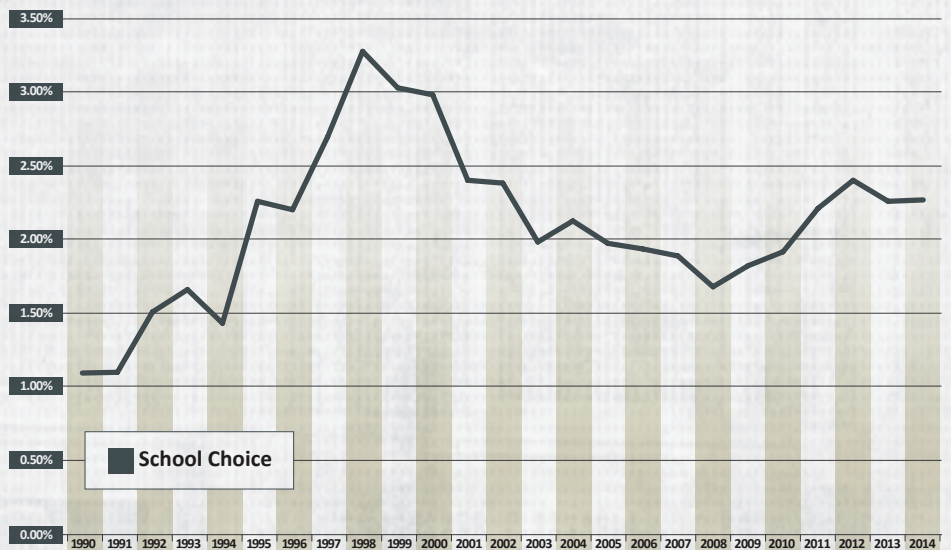
increased in the last five years. However, coverage of both issues in 2014 lagged the 25-year coverage average for the topics. Each topic peaked in coverage popularity in 2001, in the lead-up to the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act later that year.



In 2014, standards received more coverage than at any other time since 1999.

School choice: School choice – including all types of public-sector and private sector school choices and schools of choice – has remained the second most prominent policy-oriented education issue receiving coverage.

After steadily declining as a topic of news stories from 2000 to 2010, school choice mentions rebounded remarkably after 2011. When compared to the 25-year coverage average for the topic, school choice coverage in 2014 was up **6.9 percent**.



The increase in school choice coverage, over the years, is likely due to the growth in school choice options available to families, and to the increased willingness of the broader school choice movement to actively engage local, regional, and state reporters, in partnership with schools.

Policy Topics on the Decline

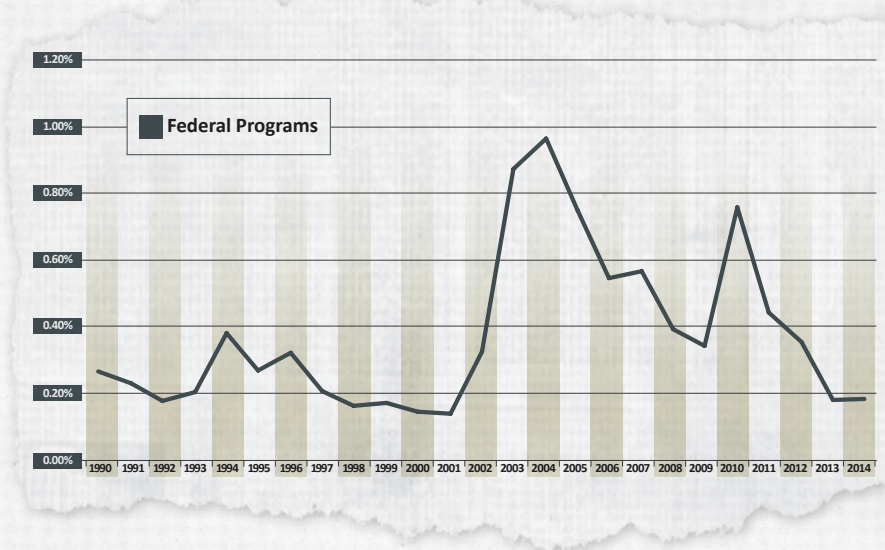
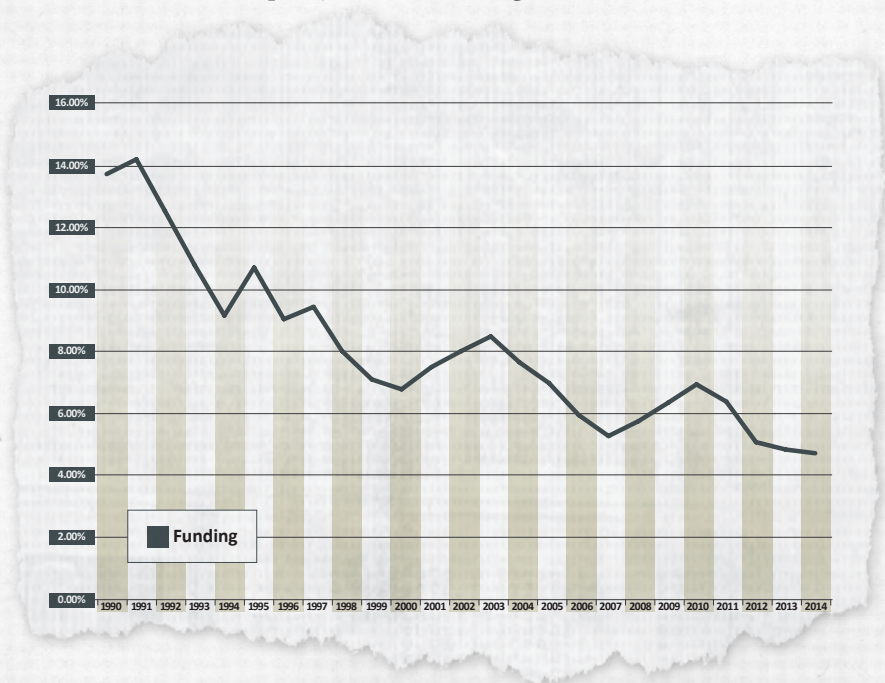
Funding: Funding is, and has remained, the single most talked-about education policy issue in local, regional and state news sources.

Despite this, mentions of education funding have dropped significantly in the last quarter century. In 1990, funding stories amounted to 13.7 percent of all education stories; in 2014, funding stories comprised 5 percent of education coverage.

In 2014, coverage of education funding was down **63.5 percent** over the 25-year coverage average for the topic.

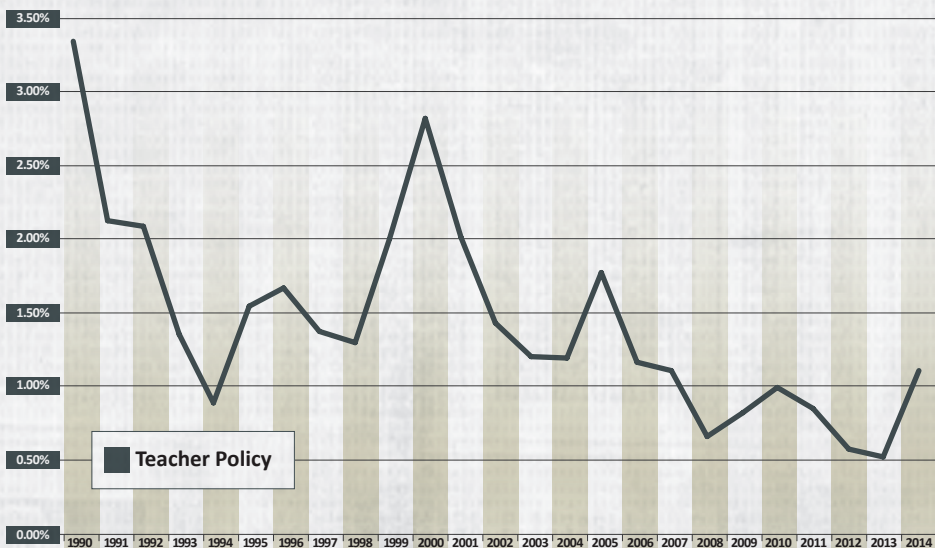
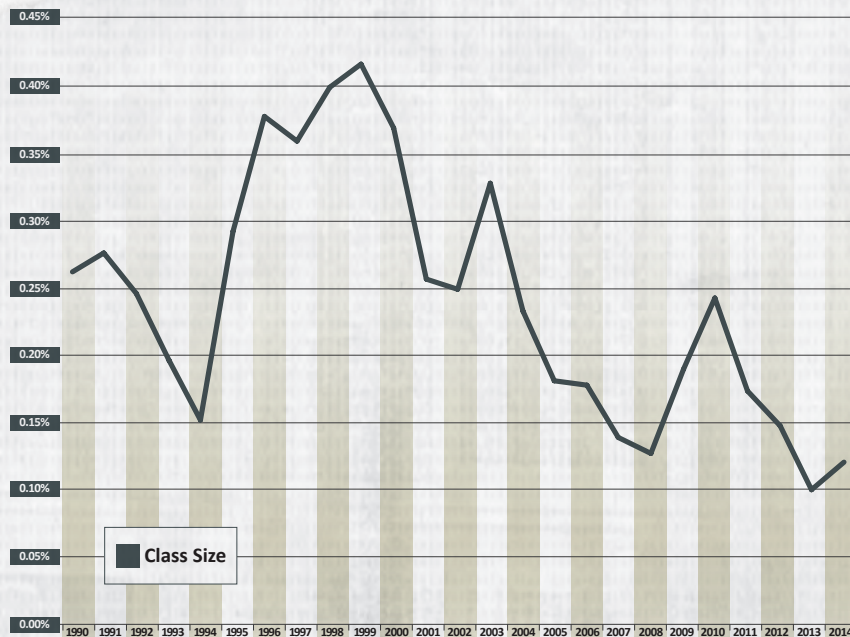
The drop in coverage of funding-related stories is likely attributable to the rise of other policy issues. The start of the modern-day education reform movement in the 1990s may have resulted in increased coverage of other topics, decreasing the share of mentions for education funding.

Federal Programs: In 2014, coverage of federal programs was down by more than **102 percent** over the 25-year average, likely because of decreased coverage of the impact of programs such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top. Understandably, federal programs tend to generate the most coverage when they are passed, and when they are initially being implemented at the local and state levels.



Class Sizes: Coverage of class sizes was, in 2014, down **97.4 percent** over the 25-year coverage average for the topic. Coverage of class sizes most recently peaked in 2010, during the highly-publicized debate over Florida's constitutional amendment to limit the size of classes.

Teacher Issues: Coverage of issues related to teachers, such as tenure, merit pay, teacher contracts, and teacher recruitment, was, in 2014, down **24 percent** over its 25-year coverage average.



The drop in coverage of funding-related stories is likely attributable to the rise of other policy issues.

Conclusion

As we get closer and closer to the 2016 presidential election, a familiar question is being asked with increasing frequency: *what role will K-12 education play in the race?*

This analysis cannot presume or predict the topics that candidates will feature in their campaign platforms.

But, if history is any guide, it is unlikely that the election will yield any significant increase in coverage of education and education policy issues at the local, regional, or state level in 2015 – and especially in 2016.

In each of the presidential election years reviewed in this survey – 1992, 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008 and 2012 – coverage of education policies dropped by an average of **6.5 percent** over the year prior.

What's more probable is that the current coverage trends – with sports and events receiving the highest percentage of mentions in news stories – will continue in the local, regional, and state-level press.

On the policy front, 2015 and 2016 will likely see a continuation of the increase in coverage for school choice and standards. Already, more school choice legislation has passed state legislatures than during any other year in recent memory. As states shift their testing systems to align to Common Core, the topics of testing, accountability, and standards may see an uptick in coverage.

The possibility exists that federal programs may see a year-over-year increase in coverage, as well. After a long delay, the US Senate is poised to consider a bipartisan reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), more commonly known as No Child Left Behind.

On the national media front, anecdotal signs point to the potential for more coverage of education policy than in years past. Politico recently unveiled, and has subsequently expanded, a news division solely focused on education policy. RealClearPolitics is now developing original education policy-related content, as well. The possibility exists that digital media, in the long term, could lead to a resurgence of national-level education policy coverage.

But with the news business evolving, and with the news itself being so unpredictable, only time will tell.

About the Author

An outspoken advocate for education reform, Andrew R. Campanella is widely recognized as one of the school choice movement's leading communications executives.

Andrew is president of National School Choice Week, an events-focused, independent public awareness effort spotlighting all types of education options for children and families.

Thanks in part to Andrew's leadership – as well as the commitment and enthusiasm of parents, students, teachers, school leaders, and reform advocates – National School Choice Week has grown from 150 special events in 2011 to 11,082 events in 2015. From 2011 to 2015, National School Choice Week events have generated more than 13,000 positive news stories for schools and organizations.

Previously, Andrew served in senior roles at the Alliance for School Choice and at the American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence. At the Alliance, Andrew served as lead researcher and co-author of several versions of the award-winning School Choice Yearbook, as well as other research publications.

A graduate of American University in Washington, D.C., Andrew grew up in Southern New Jersey and currently lives in Blue Mountain Beach, Florida. He is the owner of Campanella Media and Public Affairs, a firm that specializes in education reform communications, events, and research.



Appendix

The following is a sampling of search terms used for topics and issues.

Funding

spending OR budget OR funding OR finance OR financial

Sports

coach OR player OR score OR team OR sport OR athlete OR athletic OR sports OR football OR basketball OR hockey OR track

Transportation

transportation OR bus OR buses OR busing OR transit OR van

Music and Art

music OR art OR theater OR paint OR band OR chorus OR choir OR school play OR artist OR musician

Weather

weather OR snow OR snowing OR rain OR raining OR ice OR blizzard OR hurricane OR tornado OR sleet OR hail

Crime

crime OR gun OR guns OR violent OR violence OR arrest OR shooting OR drugs OR marijuana OR heroin OR meth OR bullying

Student Honors

student of the month OR honor roll OR honors OR academic scholarship OR awards

Subjects

reading OR math OR science OR literature OR English OR algebra OR

calculus OR history OR social studies OR physics OR chemistry

Events

event OR open house OR ceremony OR celebration OR party OR field trip OR trip

Elections

election OR elections OR campaign OR campaigns OR candidate OR candidates

Food

lunch OR breakfast OR food OR meal

Clubs

club OR clubs

School Choice

school choice OR voucher OR vouchers OR charter school OR charter schools OR magnet OR online learning OR homeschooling

Teacher Issues

teacher quality OR teacher pay OR teacher salary OR teacher salaries OR teacher tenure OR performance pay OR merit pay

School Quality

education quality OR quality of education OR school quality OR quality of schools OR school performance OR performance of schools

Accountability

accountability OR holding schools accountable OR hold schools

accountable OR school grade OR school grading

Spending

funding OR spending OR budget OR tax OR taxes OR finance OR finances

Class Size

class size OR class sizes OR size of classes

Student Achievement

student achievement OR achievement of students OR graduation rate OR dropout OR dropping out OR achievement gap OR student proficiency

Standards

school standards OR learning standards OR education standards OR state standards OR federal standards OR academic standards

Safety

school safety OR safety in schools OR school violence OR violence in schools OR bullying OR bully

Federal Programs

Goals 2000 OR No Child Left Behind OR NCLB OR Race to the Top OR RTTT OR US Department of Education OR U.S. Department of Education

Testing

testing OR standardized testing OR standardized test OR state test OR proficiency test OR student assessment





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