

Daily newspapers hold an honored place in the American experience as the principal forum for the public's open exchange of ideas that affect daily life. More than any other medium, newspapers have the capacity to convey timely, relevant, and reliable information in a meaningful context to citizens and to empower diverse voices and perspectives in the public debate.

It is surprising, therefore, that recent studies on American journalism found that newspaper readership is declining, and Americans rate daily newspapers less "believable" than television news (Fig. 1). Moreover, a majority of Americans think newspaper journalists are out of touch with mainstream society.<sup>1</sup>

*Education: A Complex Issue*

Are local newspapers out of touch with their readers? Or has the news coverage business been made tougher by the complexity of today's issues?

This study, based on a telephone survey of daily print journalists<sup>2</sup> and analysis of 403 news articles published between October 2003 and May 2004 by four daily newspaper publishers in one state,<sup>3</sup> indicates both may be true when it comes to news coverage of elementary and secondary education.

Journalists surveyed in this study unanimously said that K-12 education is a "complex issue," and nearly two-thirds believed too little media attention is paid to it (Fig. 2).

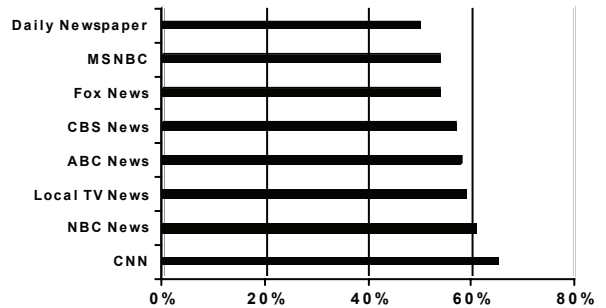
Americans are likely to agree. Education consistently ranks at or near the top of their domestic concerns, despite decades of unsuccessful efforts to reach consensus on content standards, teaching methods, testing, accountability, funding, and myriad other practices and policies in the education process.

"Most of the initiatives we see today - charter schools, vouchers, an end to social promotion, performance standards and so forth - are all part of the unfolding reform movement," writes Bill Graves of the Education Writers Association. "This era may well mark one of the most dramatic shifts in public education in American history."<sup>4</sup>

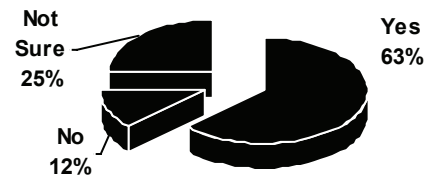
Since the 1980s, Americans have witnessed a variety of public education reforms and innovations that include and, for the first time in a century, go well beyond the conventional state-run public school.

Public schools are undergoing two major government accountability reforms: state initiatives designed to raise standards and improve the overall performance of public schools and their students; and federal initiatives designed to raise the achievement of each student subgroup within public schools and to provide some consumer protections and remedies to students whose public schools are not making adequate progress. Public school innovations, notably charter schools and intra- and inter-district school choice, are changing the way public

**Fig 1. State of the Media 2005  
"Believability" Ratings by Media Outlets**



**Fig 2. Too little media attention paid to education issues?**



schools operate and easing rigid assignment-by-residence school attendance policies.

At the same time, public education innovations involving non-state-run schools are growing in popularity. Home schooling is now widely accepted throughout the U.S.<sup>5</sup> Publicly-funded vouchers, scholarship and parental tax credits or deductions for non-public schooling expenses have withstood constitutional challenges to become common options in several areas in the nation.<sup>6</sup> Private for-profit and virtual schools are no longer outside the mainstream of ideas.<sup>7</sup>

As a result, the public's conversation about education is becoming more consumer-oriented. *Public education*, increasingly seen as meaning more than *public school*, is being redefined as an inclusive umbrella capable of accommodating all students in all types of public and non-public schools.<sup>8</sup> New student-centered questions are being raised: *What effect does an education reform or innovation have on the child? How can public education be restructured to improve students' achievement? What resources do children need?*

### *A Closed Conversation Of, By, and For Public Schools*

Education news coverage in the state's daily papers, however, reflects little of the public's changing conversation, focusing instead on traditional public school-centered questions: *What effect does an education reform or innovation have on the local public school? How can the public school be restructured to improve its performance? What resources do public schools need?*

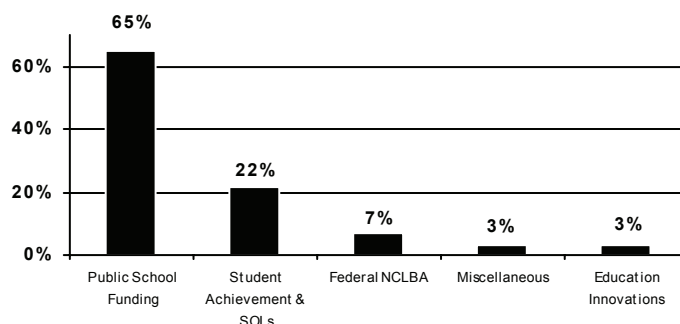
If importance can be inferred from the number of news stories, the state's newspapers rank public school funding three times more important than student achievement and related state academic reforms, ten times more important than federal accountability reforms, and 33 times more important than public education innovations (Fig 3).<sup>9</sup>

Of the 403 articles reviewed in this study, 261 (65%) dealt with public school funding matters, ranging from multi-million dollar construction projects to annual public school wage increases to a school's monthly electricity bill.

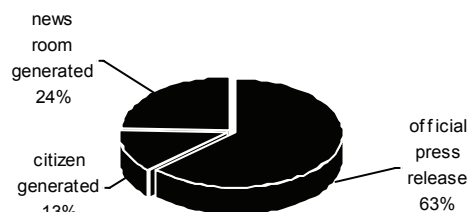
Student achievement and Virginia's Standards of Learning (SOL) reforms, a decade-old state initiative to raise the academic achievement of public schools and their students, trailed a distant second with 88 articles (22%).

The federal *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB), arguably the most complex and least understood federal accountability initiative ever undertaken,<sup>10</sup> was the subject of 28 news articles (7%). Miscellaneous topics such as local public school personnel matters, school boundary lines, and facility closings accounted for 14 articles (3%).

**Fig. 3. Topics of Published News Articles**



**Fig. 4. What Triggers News Articles?**



Public education innovations were the topics of 12 news stories (3%). Ten articles addressed public charter schools and home schooling. Two articles, which reported on contributions made by a school choice political-action committee to state legislative candidates, referenced vouchers and tuition tax credits briefly using key soundbites of supporters (increasing opportunity for children) and opponents (taking money from public schools).

Newspapers' extensive coverage of public school funding issues may be due, in part, to reliance on government and public school officials to set the education news agenda.

Asked what most commonly triggers an education story by their news organization, nearly two-thirds of the journalists surveyed (63%) said "an announcement/press release by a federal, state, or local education agency" (Fig 4). In stories originating from official government sources, an equal percentage (63%) of respondents said they seek comments from non-government sources "most of the time."

As to sources used by their news organizations in the past six months, all respondents named federal and state Departments of Education, local public school boards and officials, teachers, and parents. Most respondents (88%) added students, business leaders, and political leaders to the list. Half (50%) included public policy "think tanks," and slightly more than a third (38%) mentioned independent research organizations.

Yet a tally of the sources cited in published news articles suggests that newspaper coverage of K-12 education may be largely a closed conversation of, by, and for public schools.

Of the 1,438 sources cited in 403 education news articles, 1,364 (95%) were government/public school-affiliated sources; only 74 (5%) were non-government/public school-affiliated sources (Fig 5).

**Fig 5. Sources Cited in Articles**

