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TO: CCSSO conference call participants
FROM: Adam Kernan-Schloss, Becky Fleischauer and Erin Angell
RE: Encouraging shifts in news coverage of “needs improvement” schools

Spurred by sweeping changes brought about by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), news coverage of education issues has increased nearly five times in the last year alone. A review of this coverage shows that reporting on education issues is not only increasing in quantity, but also in its sophistication and usefulness to readers. As advocates of improved education, this is good news.

The following analysis of major national and midsized local newspaper and wire story coverage from December 2001 to June 2003 shows that an increasing number of stories have consumer-oriented, “news-you-can-use” angles that provide parents and the public with information about how students and schools are performing and where they need extra help. Media attention around the new federal accountability system that publicly reports an annual list of low-performing schools, which triggers a range of interventions from public school choice to supplemental services to reconstitution, is particularly encouraging. It has evolved from a concrete pronouncement of failure in July 2002, with little or no connection to causes or solutions, to a more discerning and localized view over the last few months that is focused more on specific problems and solutions to address them.

From distant jargon to the kitchen table

The terms used in reporting are a reflection of the increasing specificity and detail in news coverage. For example, use of the term “adequate yearly progress” (AYP), the measure by which schools are placed on the list — has increased 80 percent since last year. It’s included on almost every state Department of Education’s glossary of terms and was a topic addressed in a recent Hechinger Institute on Education & the Media newsletter and Education Writers Association seminar. What once may have been considered distant jargon is becoming a part of the reporting lexicon, with real and present consequences for readers.

From “failure” to “needs improvement”

While “failure” is still the predominant term used to describe the schools on the NCLB-mandated state lists, more nuanced distinctions in news stories are starting to take hold. Following the first July 2002 U.S. Department of Education announcement of schools that did not make federally required progress, a Nexis search found “failing” used 239 times (64 percent of the time), “low-performing” 97 times (or about 26 percent of the time), and “underperforming” 29 times in news coverage that spanned July to October, 2002. Media gravitated toward the “failing” label even though the Department announcement referred to them as schools that are in need of “school improvement.”

This problem persists. In news coverage over the last three months, “failing” was used about 60 percent to 70 percent of the time, but the use of other labels, such as “low-performing” and “needs improvement” increased slightly. This is particularly true in states that released their lists early, such as Michigan and Minnesota. In Michigan, the schools were termed “high priority” and in Minnesota they were designated as “needs improvement” schools. This was largely reflected in the news coverage. In *Talking to Reporters about Your “Needs Improvement” School List* (attached), communicators are advised to meet with education reporters and editorial boards early to stress the importance of the distinctions used to describe schools on the list. It’s about more than simply public relations; it’s helping the public make distinctions, so they may better identify solutions. By defining the terms early and leading with solutions, you are in a better position to nudge reporters toward more accurate labels.

From generalities to a closer look at gaps in achievement

News coverage has been slow to pick up that AYP is based on disaggregated data — the performance of groups of students segmented by race, income level, special needs and English language learners. Most coverage refers simply to “a more strict or rigid accountability system.” This is perpetuated by the lack of disaggregated data available in most states to make comparisons and identify trends, but in the past three months, this has begun to change — a Nexis search revealed a 76 percent spike in reporting how the achievement gaps affect AYP. For example, in Minnesota where Commissioner Cheri Pierson Yecke released an advance list of “needs improvement” schools and pledged to make closing the achievement gaps a top priority, news coverage pointed to specific schools and districts that struggled with gaps in achievement among different groups of students. Perhaps most important, the news coverage reflected Minnesota’s plan for closing the gaps — intensive school staff training this summer.

Ohio has long made closing the achievement gap a central message and in a recent announcement recognized “Schools of Promise” — schools with a poverty level of 50 percent or higher and where at least 75 percent of the students have passed the math and/or reading portions of the proficiency tests. Superintendent Susan Zelman’s quote — “These schools demonstrate that demographics should not determine a student’s academic destiny” — was picked up in several news stories about the schools. News coverage also pointed to the comprehensive reforms and stepped-up reading focus in the “Schools of Promise” that likely lead to the improvements. During a period when stressed-out educators are feeling particularly wrung out, this recognition is particularly important.

Similar stories in Chicago; Charlotte, NC; Detroit and several other cities show that coverage of achievement gaps among different groups of students is becoming much more frequent, detailed and useful. *Talking to Reporters about Your “Needs Improvement” School List* identifies several newshooks or opportunities to advance more coverage of the achievement gaps among different groups of students and what your state is doing to close them. It also suggests that communicators use The Education Trust’s state-specific data to localize the story (www.edtrust.org).

Next generation of stories

Much more attention to achievement gaps and initiatives to address them is expected in future news coverage. As more state lists are released, more notifications about school choice are sent to parents and more disaggregated test score data is made available, the focus will intensify. As *Talking to Reporters about Your “Needs Improvement” School List* advises, this provides a good opportunity to generate a host of stories that challenge assumptions and inform readers about the action required to boost achievement for *all* students.

Testing

News coverage of testing has always been popular, but it too is increasing in its level of sophistication and detail. The Hechinger Institute for Education & the Media hosted two regional seminars on testing and the Education Writers Association national conference in April featured several sessions on testing. High school exit exams and the upcoming release of National Assessment of Educational Progress scores will continue to generate coverage. Providing media outlets with tools and information about the diagnostic uses of testing and the changes in instruction that are made possible by examining assessment data will help point news coverage toward a more solution-oriented focus. Some of the most positive, solution-oriented news coverage of testing has focused on specific changes made in response to test score data. For example, news coverage in Florida highlighted efforts to beef up literacy professional development among teachers in the fourth grade as a result of dips in test scores.

Highly qualified teachers

With the new NCLB “highly qualified” teacher requirement kicking in, news coverage of teaching quality is expected to intensify. It is likely to generate the same kind of surprise that the larger-than-expected “needs improvement” lists have. However, a proactive communication strategy can help manage confusion and seize the “teachable moment.” Using summer training institutes as a “newshook,” education leaders can advance the story and inform reporters and readers about the federal definition in a context of local proactive solutions. The stories can point out that certification and licensure are important measures, but they are not the only guides. Providing research that demonstrates the importance of certification and quality professional development will help develop a better understanding of teaching quality that goes beyond the federal definition. This will allow education leaders to diffuse the likely alarm and showcase state and district actions to improve teaching quality.

Budget cuts

Coverage of education funding cuts dominated the news in December and January, but has dropped significantly since then. Still, approximately one out of every 10 education stories references funding cuts. With state budgets facing their worst crisis since World War II, news coverage of the impact budget constraints have on education will continue. Other stories expected are the number of parents taking advantage of school choice compared to last year, the organizational challenges of implementing school choice, special needs students (IDEA reauthorization), early childhood (head start reauthorization), and the criteria leading to and the schools identified as “persistently dangerous.”

Lessons

Talking to Reporters about Your “Needs Improvement” School List suggests that news coverage follows predictable formulas. The review of news coverage of low-performing schools over the past year and a half confirms the prevalence of specific types of stories journalists tend to cover. Communicators can use these insights to identify patterns, anticipate and ride each news wave with the right positive message, and, in some cases, create waves of their own.

1. Proactively define the terms. By getting out ahead of the federal “needs improvement” list announcement, states seem to gain an advantage in ensuring that their administration’s priorities are reflected in news coverage and a reduction in the use of “failing” as a descriptor. For example, news coverage in Minnesota and Michigan clearly articulated proactive plans to address identified weaknesses in “high priority” or “needs improvement” schools. This is a marked contrast from July 2002 coverage that seemed to perpetuate perceptions of static, “failing” schools.
2. Lead with solutions. Focusing on how problems will be addressed demonstrates action and a sincere belief that previously intractable problems can be changed. Such a focus provides the “how” for how schools on the “needs improvement” list can be “improved.”
3. Manage expectations about the difficulty of the task. In a quick-fix culture, the enormity of the task must be recognized. To reduce the level of frustration about the pace of change, school leaders must articulate the difficulty of the challenge and the breadth of support required.
4. Localize the story as much as possible. The closer to home the data, the more empowered the reader is to use it to learn about their school’s strengths and weaknesses and identify potential solutions.