EWA
EDUCATION WRITERS ASSOCIATION

REPORTER GUIDES

Standards & Ethics

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Many education reporters are drawn to the beat because of its complexity and rich variety. Few topics provide such a wealth of political, business, human interest, breaking news, feature, and investigative stories. A reporter's day can start in a classroom with 4-year-olds struggling to learn to read, and end at a school board meeting with politicians struggling to get a $1 billion budget passed. As they grow in knowledge and skills, reporters begin to appreciate the intricacies of both processes — as well as the connections between them.

In a beat that is so wide-ranging and evolving, reporters will inevitably differ in interests and approach. Some will become spreadsheet experts who can analyze test scores and budgets with an ease others dream of. Others will immerse themselves in classrooms and specialize in telling the frontline stories of educators and children. And some will closely track the political landscape, reporting in depth on policy debates and changes at the national, state, or local level.

This guide lays out the basic standards education journalists should strive to follow regardless of their particular specialties or areas of expertise. It draws on the comprehensive work of Oregonian reporter Bill Graves, who wrote the Education Writers Association's first set of standards 11 years ago. But it has been updated to reflect the transformation of the industry, including the rapid growth in online journalism and social media; it has also been revised to incorporate changes on the beat, such as the rise of charter schools and online education, as well as shifts in federal education policy. The recommendations presented here should be viewed as guidelines, not rules.

Skills

Some of the necessary skills for education reporting have remained consistent across decades, even generations. Education journalists have always needed to know how to evaluate schools based on both qualitative and quantitative measures, how to interview children effectively, and how to analyze a budget.

Other skills have emerged and expanded in recent years. It's increasingly important that education reporters be able to organize and analyze data using spreadsheet programs like Excel, for instance, given that many school districts and states now make data available only in that form. And education journalists must know how to use the Internet to cultivate sources, find story ideas, and interact with readers to an extent that might have seemed unimaginable a decade ago.

A reporter's toolbox is always evolving. The following catalog of skills for education reporters should be considered a starting point for pursuing the craft of education journalism rather than a immutable list.

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SIZE UP A SCHOOL: Reporters need to be able to assess the quality and nature of a school quickly, but carefully. They must pay attention to whether students are engaged in work, teachers are professional and prepared, and administrators have a motivating and organizing effect on the school. They should know how to spot signs of quality — such as an open-door policy for parents, student work on the walls, and minimal outbursts or disruptions — while also recognizing that there is no single formula for running a good school. They must know when, where, and how to check their qualitative judgments against more quantitative measures such as test scores, attendance, records, and teacher turnover. News reports on school quality can profoundly affect the reputation of schools, so reporters must be fair, knowledgeable, and thoughtful in their assessments.

ANALYZE BUDGETS & STATISTICS: At every level of education — school, district, university, state or federal — education journalists must be able to read and decipher budgets, spotting trends, gaps, or aberrations in the intake and outflow of money for schools. They must be comfortable with numbers, as they will frequently be awash in them. When test scores are released, for instance, reporters often have to summarize and analyze large quantities of data on a tight deadline. Understanding basic concepts and processes, such as how to work percentages or spot statistically improbable growth, is crucial. Ideally, education reporters will know how to employ more sophisticated statistical analysis techniques. But they should, at a minimum, know what terms like "statistically significant" and "regression analysis" mean, because they are crucial to gauging the validity and importance of quantitative research findings on education and a host of other related topics.

INTERVIEW CHILDREN: Education reporters must learn how to interview students effectively and with sensitivity. If uncomfortable or unsure how to begin, reporters new to the beat can get inspiration and tips from watching or listening to veteran journalists interview children. But this is a skill that usually comes through experience. With practice, education reporters learn the types of questions children are more likely to respond to, how to put kids at ease, and what constitutes age-appropriate language. Those who learn from their mistakes and successes will find interviewing children — like teaching — to be as much a skill as an art. (Please see the ethics portion of the guide for more on this subject.)

USE TECHNOLOGY & SOCIAL MEDIA: Education journalists need to be comfortable telling their stories using multiple platforms. They should also be able to generate story ideas and engage readers via social media such as Twitter and Facebook. Across all beats, journalists are expected to do more multimedia reporting (online, in print, through video and audio), social media promotion, and online reader engagement. But in education reporting, facility in these rapidly growing areas takes on added importance. For instance, education reporters increasingly might find it easier to contact (and gauge the opinions of) teenagers via Facebook or Twitter than through more traditional means. They also can use video and audio to enhance their coverage of teaching and learning inside schools and classrooms. While education reporters should be adept and comfortable with social media and reporting across multiple platforms, they should also learn how to do so in a professional and ethical manner. (For additional information please see Poynter's guide to ethical issues in online journalism.)

UNDERSTAND POLITICAL DYNAMICS: Education reporters need to be skillful in detecting when school politics are in play at the local, state, and federal levels. School board members, teachers' unions, and administrators all engage in political tugs for control or power. Governors, lawmakers, and mayors sometimes promote specific education policies or changes with broader political goals in sight. Reporters need to understand the political landscape well enough to detect when school initiatives are launched more for political rather than educational ends. They also need to learn which foundations, think tanks, and education nonprofits have education agendas, and how those agendas can affect their priorities and work. When new education research comes out, reporters need to understand the political landscape well enough to know whether it's the work of groups — or supported by funders — that have established points of view on schools.

KNOW OPEN MEETINGS & PUBLIC RECORDS LAWS: Education journalists should familiarize themselves with relevant open meetings laws so they will know if — and when — a school board, charter school board, or state board of education might be in violation. They should also know which types of documents and records are available to the public (school employee names and salary levels, for instance) and which ones are not (individual student report cards or discipline records, for instance). And they must know how, and when, to file an open records request.

USE SPREADSHEETS & DATABASE PROGRAMS: Education journalists must possess at least basic proficiency with spreadsheet and database programs, because state, school district, and college data increasingly are available only in spreadsheet form. Reporters will also find that knowledge of these programs enhances their ability to sort, summarize, and analyze education-related data of all types, including test scores. Ideally, education reporters will possess a wide range of data-mining techniques, such as being able to use a tool like Google Correlate to create graphics that enhance their coverage. But at a minimum, they should be fluent in spreadsheet programs like Excel.

REPORT & INTERVIEW ON A BROAD RANGE OF SUBJECTS: Unlike journalists who perform a very specialized role at a news organization, such as restaurant or art critics, education journalists must be both specialists and generalists. Most education reporters will find they have to cover a broad range of stories, including politics, business, breaking news, and human interest. They will have to cultivate a wide variety of sources. They should, for instance, be quickly able to call on students, parents, teachers, administrators, professors, board members, business and political leaders, as well as ordinary people in the community. The education beat can overlap with several others — such as politics, social welfare, crime, and economic development — so education reporters should learn the major sources and issues on those beats as well as their own.

Ethics

Journalists on all beats often face important ethical questions. But that is especially true for education reporters, because their work involves covering children. Some ethical decisions are black and white: Education reporters should never, for instance, interview a young child about a sensitive topic like sexual abuse without the permission and presence of a trusted adult. But many issues are gray areas: Thoughtful journalists might reach different conclusions, and even the most careful, experienced reporters may misread a situation or make a mistake.

The following guidelines aim to help steer journalists through some of the murkier ethical terrain they will undoubtedly encounter when reporting on children, families, and education. To help understand the practical import of the guidelines, we have included a hypothetical reporting scenario related to each. Some are based on actual events.

1. ***You are reporting a story on students being retained because of their low test scores. A teacher introduces you to a family with an eighth-grader who has been held back, saying they have agreed to speak to you about their experiences at the school.***

Be explicit on the front end. No journalist should misrepresent his or her identity or intent. But it is particularly incumbent on education reporters to ensure that children and families have a thorough sense of the journalistic process and the potential stakes in participating. When writing about academic failure, for instance, reporters should let the family know the specific topic and how the information about them is likely to be presented. Likewise, when visiting classrooms and schools, education reporters should try to ensure — whenever practically possible — that employees and students know who they are and the purpose of the visit.

2. ***You interview a mature and articulate 14-year-old for a daily story about a new study on teenage drug use. In the course of the interview, the student admits to having been pressured to smoke marijuana once at a party. He says you can include his name and that his parents know about the marijuana. Just before deadline, he calls and asks to be taken out of the story because his parents are irate about the interview. He is the only student voice you had for the story.***

Be permissive on the back end. While reporting on young people, journalists and media organizations should be more flexible when it comes to such issues as unnamed sources and the retraction of controversial quotes. They should also consider making extra efforts to review stories with young sources in advance of publication. If a student realizes that participating in a report could cause him significant harm or embarrassment — even after having consented to an interview — journalists should strongly consider removing the teenager's name or quotes altogether.

3. ***You cover K-12 and higher education for a medium-size newspaper. Your paper has instituted several rounds of pay cuts, so you are excited when a local foundation offers you a freelance writing gig.***

Never accept work you would not feel comfortable disclosing publicly. With news organizations struggling financially, many reporters are under increased pressure to make ends meet. But they usually cannot work for the sources or institutions they cover — even if the assignments appear harmless.

An education journalist might consider doing freelance work for a local foundation uninvolved in school-related causes. But if the foundation advocates on education issues, then the assignment would likely pose a conflict. Increasingly, education journalists might find themselves writing for news outlets that receive funding from foundations or organizations with an education agenda. This arrangement is becoming acceptable in mainstream journalism — particularly if the news outlet maintains funders with diverse agendas and perspectives and specifies that it will maintain control over editorial content.

4. ***In the course of visiting a campus for a feature you sit in on a class where the teacher struggles to maintain order. One particular student interrupts the lesson incessantly by telling cruel jokes about his classmates and teachers. In a sudden and frustrated outburst, the teacher calls the student "stupid" and says he will "never amount to anything."***

Weigh carefully the public's need to know against an individual's right to privacy. Part of an education journalist's job is to assess the quality of schools and expose wrongdoing or incompetence inside them. But they are not restaurant or art critics expected to grade different aspects of a school's performance; and nor are they charged with picking away at every mistake or imperfection. After witnessing conduct that is unprofessional or egregious, education journalists should first strive to put it in context. In the scenario above, for instance, they would want to learn whether the teacher routinely berates her students or not. After learning as much about the context as possible, reporters should ask whether there is a broad public interest in exposing the information. In the example above, for instance, the incident would be worth reporting on if — unchecked by any administrator — teachers at the school regularly demeaned their students.

5. ***While interviewing the valedictorian of a small high school for a graduation profile, she tells you that she became pregnant as a sophomore and had an abortion. The 19-year-old says it's fine to include this detail in the piece because her family and close friends all know about the incident. She's not sure if the baby's father ever heard about the abortion, but says it's not important because he has moved to another town and is no longer a part of her life.***

Don't condescend, but err on the side of assuming naiveté. The vast majority of children have little firsthand experience with media interviews. Many of them do not

understand the role of a journalist, and might never have read a newspaper or magazine, or even seen a television news report. Education journalists should assume minors are not familiar with concepts such as on and off-the-record, and do not fully grasp the implications of media exposure. They should explain to children that articles or videos about them can live indefinitely on the Web, reaching readers and viewers they might not have anticipated, including relatives, friends, and strangers.

6. ***You are a television news reporter covering a mass school shooting which left several elementary school children — you are not quite sure how many yet — dead. There is intense competitive pressure and dozens of journalists have flooded the scene in what appears to be an unprecedented tragedy. You come across a first-grader and her mother, both visibly shaken. Somewhat to your surprise, the mother agrees to let you interview her son on camera.***

First, do no harm. This medical adage should be applied to coverage of children and schools. Journalists should be careful not to add to a child's trauma or pain when reporting highly sensitive or controversial stories. Generally, they should defer to a parent or trusted adult when deciding what might cause harm. But they should also recognize that there are instances when even a parent's judgment may be deeply impaired. Sometimes parents lack sophistication concerning the media; other times they may be too traumatized themselves to protect their child adequately. In such cases, education reporters must use their own judgment, remembering that a child's safety and well-being should take precedence over competitive media pressures.

7. ***You are covering the death of a teenage girl struck by a train. She is the third local teenager to die in a train accident in the last 18 months. On the girl's Facebook page, some students have written that the three deceased teenagers were all members of a Goth clique who had formed a suicide pact.***

Verify online information. Resourceful education journalists use social media to reach out to teenagers and get story ideas or tips. But many teenagers do not realize that what they post is publicly visible — much less that it could end up in a newspaper. Moreover, some students, and even adults, use the Internet to spread rumors and misinformation in ways even veteran journalists might not always anticipate. The Internet should be used as a resource, not a shortcut. Education journalists should make sure they do not get sloppy — by copying and pasting information from sites like Wikipedia, for instance, or repeating unverified statements made by students online.

Knowledge P-12

Charters and Choice

Reporters should know about the rapid rise in alternatives to traditional schools over the past 15 years, including charters, school voucher and tuition tax credit programs, and home schooling. Traditional public school enrollment still dwarfs enrollment in choice programs nationwide. But in several communities, particularly cities, charters have grown fast. As of 2012, charters enrolled more than 20 percent of public schoolchildren in 25 communities. Reporters need to learn whether the districts they cover have school choice programs, which types, and how popular they are. They should also know the broader history and debate over school choice, especially charters. Since their inception, charters have attracted politically diverse supporters with differing motivations. Some hope charters will create an education "marketplace" and lead to greater privatization while others hope the schools might empower teachers to come together around a shared vision. Charters vary considerably in their goals, curriculum, and quality. Several hundred are part of national or regional charter school networks, such as Achievement First or the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP); others are standalone schools started by local educators. Despite conflicting research findings, there is little evidence that charters, vouchers, or other forms of school choice have significantly moved the needle when it comes to the overall quality of public education in America.

School leadership and governance

Like teachers, many school principals and superintendents are under increasing pressure to improve test scores if they want to keep their jobs. While the trend does not appear to have significantly affected turnover rates among the leadership ranks — which have always been high in some communities — it has changed the role and expectations of school leaders. The trend has also prompted some communities to experiment with alternative forms of school leadership and governance in efforts to improve outcomes. Examples include mayoral and state takeovers of school districts, teacher-led schools, and alternative recruitment and training programs like New Leaders and the Entrepreneurial Leaders for Public Education Fellowship Program. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has been highly critical of the ability of locally elected school boards to run large, urban districts successfully, stating that he prefers mayoral control. But nationwide, school boards continue to oversee the vast majority of school districts, particularly in small towns. Reporters should be able to see the relationships between leadership, policy, and classroom practice. They should examine, for example, the impact a mayoral takeover has on educational priorities and policies; whether a principal who emerges from a program like New Leaders has a substantially different set of skills than one from a more traditional background; and how curriculum and daily rhythms can vary at a teacher-led school. They should be hesitant, however, to attribute school improvement or failure solely to changes in leadership or governance, because such changes often come accompanied by altered resource levels, community support, or staffing.

The federal role

The federal role in public education increased significantly in the 1980s, when the U.S. Department of Education became a cabinet-level agency. Despite occasional threats to abolish the department since that time, the federal role has continued to expand and evolve under both Democratic and Republican presidential administrations over the past 30 years. Education remains a local issue in many respects, governed by local school boards and supported by local property taxes. But federal education spending has grown substantially, particularly for special education and programs targeting low-income children. And federal officials influence schools in ways that might have seemed unimaginable a generation ago. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, for instance, required annual testing and prompted a sea change in the curricula, daily habits, and goals in the nation's public schools. More recently, the Obama administration's Race to the Top competitive grant programs caused several states to create new systems for evaluating teachers and to expand charter schools. No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top have been controversial among both liberals and conservatives. Despite that controversy, the increased federal role in public education is not likely to diminish anytime soon, and reporters need to understand how it affects local and state priorities and decisions.

Special education

Special education is one of the more legally, technically, and ethically complicated subjects on which education journalists report. But it's crucial that they understand this area, given that millions of children receive special education services — often at a very high cost to school districts and taxpayers. Reporters should know about the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) — originally enacted in 1975 under another name — which for the first time required public schools to serve students with disabilities. They should also know the basic provisions of the federal law, including that schools develop "individual education plans" (or IEPs) for students with physical, emotional, and mental disabilities. Special education is one of the more jargon-laden areas in public education. Journalists need to be able to translate that jargon into language the general public can understand. In recent years, for example, schools have tried to "mainstream" special education students or educate them in the "least restrictive environment." That usually means students with disabilities are spending more time in general education classes, and less time in solitary or small-group settings. Reporters need to be aware of the current debates over special education, including whether charter schools adequately serve disabled children; whether some school districts are over-identifying or under-identifying students with special needs; and whether parents or educators should be allowed to create schools (or programs inside a school) targeted solely at children with a specific disability.

History and context

Good education reporters have a solid grasp on the history of U.S. education. They should know about Horace Mann and the common school movement of the early 1800s; the Committee of Ten that helped design the modern high school in the 19th century; the emergence of IQ testing and sorting in the 1920s; the progressive school movement launched by John Dewey in the early 20th century; the struggles for desegregation marked by the U.S. Supreme Court 1954 decision in Brown v. Board of Education; the civil rights movement and re-segregation of schools that followed; and the emphasis on measurable outcomes like test scores that has defined education reform over the past two decades. They should also be aware of how the United States' education policies, approach, and results fit in an international context, including where the country ranks on such tests as the Programme for International Student Assessment.

Accountability and testing

Over the past three decades, the accountability movement has prompted a sea change in American schools as students take more standardized tests than at any point in the nation's history. This movement is most closely associated with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, which mandated annual standardized testing. The increased testing has come with high stakes for both schools and students: Schools risk loss of students, leadership changes, and even closure if they do not reach set performance levels. And many schools and districts have scaled back, or even eliminated, social promotion programs that let students advance grade levels regardless of their performance or test scores. Increasingly, teachers' futures are also tied to test scores because many states have linked teacher retention and pay decisions to student results.

The growth in testing has been highly controversial, and journalists need to understand the arguments on both sides. Advocates of increased accountability and testing argue that for too long failing schools and teachers have been left untouched as generations of children lost their chance at a high-quality public education. Skeptics say struggling educators and schools should be shored up, not closed, and that testing strips the curriculum of breadth and stigmatizes low-performing students. Journalists need to understand the reasons for the ramped-up testing and accountability, including the release in 1983 of A Nation at Risk, a report that criticized the quality of American schools, and ongoing fears over the country's economic competitiveness.

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Early childhood education

Education journalists should learn what the research says about the impact of high-quality early childhood programs — which are increasingly defined as those serving children from infancy through third grade — on brain development, education performance, and long-term life outcomes such as teen pregnancy, job stability, and incarceration rates. Several landmark studies have tracked these issues, including the Abecedarian Project, the Perry Preschool Project, and a longitudinal study of the Chicago Child-Parent Centers.

Although advocates for comprehensive early childhood education would like to see more programs focused on the entire birth through elementary school continuum, funding and political support remain piecemeal, with various federal, state, and local programs targeting different age groups and income levels. Journalists must become familiar with the federal Head Start program and any state or locally funded programs in the districts they cover (state programs are almost always focused on three- and four-year-olds). They should also know the major debates in the early childhood realm, including the tension between quality versus quantity and academic instruction versus socioemotional development. Often, newsrooms do not consider early childhood education part of the K-12 beat structure, but it's a vital component of understanding the intersections between poverty, education, and economic development.

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Demographics and diversity

Writing sensitively and knowledgeably about the role of race, poverty, and gender in education is one of the most challenging tasks journalists face. To do so, they must know the history of American education, including Horace Mann's conviction that public education could be one of the best equalizers among social classes, and the challenges that minority communities have historically faced in accessing high-quality, equitably funded schools.

Landmark cases such as Plessy v. Ferguson and Brown v. Board are important, but reporters should also understand what followed those decisions. They should be familiar, for instance, with local patterns of white and middle-class flight, the violence and upheaval that accompanied school desegregation in many communities, and the role and limitations of magnet schools and inter-district transfer programs in prompting integration. The rapid growth in the Hispanic population has affected schools across the country in recent decades. Reporters should be familiar with controversies surrounding the DREAM Act and laws in Alabama, Georgia, and Arizona that can require schools to check residency status when families enroll students.

Many recent reforms have aimed to improve the academic performance of low-income children, including charter schools, an increased emphasis on teacher quality, and expanded time for learning, such as longer school days and years. But a small and growing group of educators and researchers hope to re-focus the nation's attention on school desegregation, which they argue holds the most promise in finally closing the achievement gap. To what extent schools can — and should be expected to — eliminate the effects of poverty remains a perennial source of debate in the country.

Teacher training and recruitment

For several years, traditional schools of education have been under fire for failing to attract top-caliber students and for being out of touch with a changing education landscape. One 2006 report authored by Arthur Levine, the former president of Teachers College, Columbia University, concluded that most education schools are engaged in a "pursuit of irrelevance." The quality of education schools actually varies considerably as some states are now discovering firsthand: New data tracking systems allow them to connect teachers' classroom results to the preparation programs they attended.

Alternative teacher recruitment programs such as Teach For America and TNTP (The New Teacher Project) have expanded dramatically over the past two decades. Typically, these programs are far more selective than traditional education schools and rely on highly condensed training sessions (five weeks in the case of Teach For America) before teachers are placed in front of their own classrooms. Reporters should know the main arguments for and against alternative programs like TFA. They should be skeptical of claims made on both extremes of the debate: Teach For America has not caused mass layoffs or led to the downfall of the profession, but nor has it proved to be the salvation of struggling American schools.

Teacher quality

Controversial efforts to improve the nation's teaching corps are among the most contentious issues in contemporary American K-12 education. Between 2009, when a much-debated report on teacher effectiveness called "The Widget Effect" was published, and the end of 2012, more than 30 states and the District of Columbia made policy changes in teacher evaluation; several of them required evaluations to include data-based evidence of student learning.

Often, this evidence is tracked through what's known as "value-added" growth, or comparing individual students' progress over time with that of students from similar backgrounds and starting points. Proponents argue that teachers' unions have grown too powerful and that teachers should be judged, hired, and fired based at least partly on their students' progress. Skeptics argue that good teaching can't be boiled down to a set of numbers and that the changes may deter many strong educators from entering — or staying — in the field.

In a growing number of locales, the revised evaluation systems are upending teacher tenure and pay models that have long been based largely on seniority and degree credentials. Some teachers' unions have been more open to the changes than others. Overall, however, the shift is widely perceived as an attack on the power historically wielded by the unions. Whether it will improve the caliber of teachers overall remains to be seen.

Public-private partnerships

Education-related partnerships between the public and private sectors are nothing new. Some of the country's first public schools started as private institutions that gradually received more and more government funding. But these partnerships have become increasingly prominent and prevalent in recent years. Some are national in scope and origin. The federal Investing in Innovation (i3) grants created under the Obama administration, for instance, encourage school districts and charters to collaborate with private non-profits on "innovative" projects. Other partnerships are much more local: Donors or foundations step in to fund a school's extended day programs, for instance.

A growing number of charter schools and traditional districts employ development staff charged with fundraising. Although private-public partnerships can inject badly needed resources into the public schools, they have raised broader concerns about sustainability and equity. Critics also argue that such partnerships allow foundations, other nonprofit organizations, and even individuals to exert undue influence over education policies and priorities. Between 2000 and 2006, for instance, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation offered several urban school districts millions of dollars to create new, smaller high schools, an incentive that helped shape district policy in some instances.

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Student learning

Educators, policymakers, and parents have starkly contrasting views of how student achievement can best be defined and measured. Increasingly, student learning is being equated with test scores. But the pushback against this trend has been fierce, with thousands of educators enraged at the extent to which test preparation dominates the educational process. Meanwhile, a growing number of middle-class families have joined the "opt-out movement," preventing their children from taking high-stakes standardized tests.

Despite the resistance, the focus continues to shift away from what teachers teach to what, and how much, students learn — at least as defined by tests. This is part of a broader shift in American education away from "inputs" to "outputs." Schools are no longer judged so much on factors like degree level of teachers, class sizes, and per-pupil spending as they are on test scores, graduation rates, and teacher effectiveness.

Curriculum and instruction

One of the most sweeping recent changes in the area of curriculum and instruction has been the adoption of the Common Core State Standards, which aim to bring greater alignment to what's being taught — and learned — across states in American public schools. Between 2012 and 2014, most states will implement the standards, which cover English language arts and mathematics. Reporters must be astute to the ways the standards change — or fail to change — curricula and standardized testing in the states and districts they cover. They should also be aware of concerns stretching back more than a decade that the growth in testing has narrowed the curriculum, forcing schools to focus on tested subjects like math and reading at the expense of areas like art and physical education.

Many of the fiercest debates over textbooks and curriculum — including whether intelligent design should be taught in science classes — are still fought at the local and state levels, however. Moreover, despite the standardization of curricula wrought by the Common Core and increased testing, reporters will find teachers' approach and content still varies widely across communities, schools, and even individual classrooms. Journalists should know major trends and styles of learning and instructional approach. Those include Montessori, which emphasizes tactile learning and child initiative; direct instruction, which is teacher-led and often highly scripted; and the structured, regimented routines imposed inside many high-performing charter school networks, such as KIPP.

School finance

Nearly all public schools and districts are supported by some combination of local property taxes, state funding, and federal grants. And increasingly, some schools receive private or foundation funding that allows them to supplement their offerings. While not getting lost in technicalities that are of little interest to most readers, reporters should be able to explain how the school funding formula works in the communities they cover, and the proportion of money spent on such areas as teacher compensation and administration.

Reporters can expect to cover financial inequities among districts or even schools. To put these inequities in perspective, education journalists need to know what studies show about the complex relationships between money and student achievement. As in other areas of the education debate, reporters should be suspicious of the extremes: Those who argue that more money is never the answer may be just as misguided as those who claim it's the only answer.

Digital education

The role of digital technology in education has greatly expanded over the past decade, transforming the educational experience for millions of students. Reporters need to know about the growth in virtual schools and online courses, and the competition they can pose to traditional school districts. They must examine the backgrounds of virtual school operators closely to see what their success or shortcomings have been in other communities. In some states, so-called "cyber charters" have been grossly deficient in quality, but it's impossible to generalize in a field that that has been growing and evolving so rapidly.

Reporters should also be familiar with hybrid models like flipped classrooms and blended learning. In wealthy and poor communities alike, schools have spent enormous sums of money in recent years on digital whiteboards, technology labs, and computers, even purchasing iPads or laptop computers for all students in some schools and districts. Reporters must remain clear-eyed in their assessment of these programs and expenditures, and be able to separate the substance from the hype in their reports. Some schools are using technology to great effect, while in others computer labs and digital whiteboards sit virtually untouched.

Knowledge Higher Education

Curriculum and instruction

The approach to teaching and learning at higher education institutions is as varied as the institutions themselves. Education journalists would find very little similarity between the curriculum at an elite liberal arts college and a community college focused on preparing students to move directly into careers, for instance. That said, there are common questions reporters should ask when covering this area. When writing about a specific college or university, they should learn whether the institution favors large lectures, smaller discussion classes, Oxford-style tutorials, or a combination of all three; whether the curriculum is structured around a set of common classes all students must take, or is more flexible; and whether the curriculum is designed to promote abstract skills like critical thinking or to prepare students for specific careers.

More generally, education reporters should pay attention to programmatic trends and the ways in which funding pressures influence what's taught at universities — and what's not taught. Some colleges might respond to budget cuts by trimming specific departments or programs, for instance, while others might increase class size across the board.

Community colleges

Community colleges are one of the most important parts of the American higher education system, yet they are often overlooked in favor of stories on topics like student life and budget cuts at four-year universities. As of spring of 2012, the nation had more than 1,100 community colleges, most of them educating students who can't afford or gain admission to four-year universities, adult learners returning to school, and full- or part-time workers balancing college courses with jobs. In many areas, community colleges are the only means of access that low-income and non-traditional students have to the nation's public higher education system. As such, they play a vital role in social mobility.

Yet community colleges' role in lessening inequality is threatened by budget cuts, surging enrollment in some communities, and low graduation rates. A 2011 report from the National Center for Education Statistics found that community college students have a three-year graduation rate of about 27 percent. As with the K-12 system, reporters should be wary of those who lay the blame for that statistic solely on such factors as mismanagement or under-funding. Many community colleges could do more to improve student retention, particularly for students trapped in multiple semesters of not-for-credit remedial courses. But these institutions also work on very meager budgets in many instances to meet the needs of the most diverse and challenging student population in American higher education today.

For-profit universities

The role and practices of the growing sector of for-profit higher education has been one of the most controversial subjects in postsecondary education in recent years. Journalists should know about the largest institutions in this sector, such as the University of Phoenix; and they should know about the debates over recruitment and financial aid practices at some of these schools.

For-profit institutions account for less than 20 percent of the country's university enrollment. Yet nearly a quarter of federal Pell Grant funds go to students attending for-profits, and half of all student loan defaults are from students who attended such institutions. This data has caused critics to accuse them of being more interested in generating profits than serving the students they enroll. Defenders say the universities reach student populations that have long been ignored by the higher education establishment, and that for-profits have been more open to embracing innovations in online learning.

Access and admissions

College attendance rates have been rising for years in traditionally underserved communities, including low-income students, racial and ethnic minorities, and first-generation students. But the gaps between such students and their more advantaged peers remain large, with many conflicting viewpoints as to what to do about them. Debate on the subject pits open access against selective admissions; need-based financial aid against merit-based aid; subjective admissions criteria against objective admissions criteria; and proponents of affirmative action against opponents.

Some universities have made significant changes to their admissions and financial aid policies in recent years in an effort to attract a more diverse student body, including dropping the requirement that applicants submit SAT or ACT scores, or increasing scholarship packages for low- to moderate-income families. In 2003, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that universities could take race into consideration when making admissions decisions. As of April 2013, however, the Court was reconsidering that decision. The ruling could mean that colleges can no longer have race-based admissions preferences.

Funding and spending

Like schools in the K-12 system, universities are under pressure to show results even as some states slash education funding. This has left dozens of universities with no choice but to raise tuition, which is often politically unpopular and sometimes unfeasible, or make budget cuts that can mean lost programs or departments, increased class sizes, or replacing full-time faculty with less expensive adjuncts.

"Gaps between such students and their more advantaged peers remain large, with many conflicting viewpoints as to what to do about them."

Education journalists need to know the major sources of revenue for higher education institutions: tuition and fees, public funding, donors, and ancillary services such as patents. They also need to know the major expenses: salaries and benefits for adjuncts and professors; administration; research; and student support. When universities must make cuts, reporters should pay attention to which areas they trim and which they preserve, as it can say quite a bit about the institution's long-term aspirations.

Reporters also need to know how much the balance of funding can vary depending on the school, or type of school, in question. For-profits receive almost all of their revenue from public funds, including Pell Grants and federal student loans. Many nonprofit private universities, on the other hand, take in a far greater share through tuition and donations.

Retention and completion

More than half of students who start college do not finish, leaving millions of Americans with debt but no degree. The low retention and completion rates have attracted increased concern and scrutiny in recent years, with the Gates Foundation, Lumina Foundation, and the College Board among the more high-profile organizations attempting to address the problem. A 2006 report titled "A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education" criticized colleges and universities for not doing more to keep their students from dropping out.

The low, although increasing, completion rates have contributed to America losing its stature as the nation with the highest percentage of citizens with a post-secondary credential. As of 2010, 41 percent of Americans ages 25 to 64 had college degrees. Factors affecting college completion rates are varied and complex. In some cases, students find themselves buried in credit-less remedial courses, flunk out, or lack the funding to continue. In other cases, universities provide inadequate support services, like counseling. Some fault the structure of the American higher education system for low completion rates, and argue that students should be able to earn a four-year degree more quickly and flexibly.

Online learning and virtual universities

Since the late 1990s, growth in online learning has sent shock waves throughout higher education, prompting some experts to question whether traditional structures and institutions are relevant or even necessary. However, it's important for education journalists to bear in mind that while online learning has wrought major changes in some areas — leading to the creation of virtual universities and prompting thousands of colleges and universities to rethink their business models, teaching approaches, and course offerings — it has not yet upended American higher education.

Education journalists need to pay attention to both the business and the academic sides of online learning, asking tough questions about online ventures' financial sustainability and impact on teaching and learning. They should stay aware of trends — like the growth in massive open online courses (MOOCs) at some of the nation's most elite universities — but also be hesitant whenever anyone claims to be "first" in this rapidly changing and competitive arena.

Leadership and management

Colleges and universities, like large school districts, have increasingly turned to leaders from outside academia in recent years. As of 2012, 20 percent of college presidents came from nonacademic fields, up from 13 percent in 2006. Nearly a third of the presidents never worked as professors. The shift reflects a broader corporatization throughout American society. But it also speaks to the difficult finances facing many universities, whose boards and trustees want their presidents to serve as effective fundraisers and financial stewards, and might increasingly rely on a dean to oversee curriculum and instruction.

In keeping with this trend, presidents' salaries have risen steadily, particularly at large state institutions, with a few even commanding seven-figure salaries. Faculty salaries have also increased overall, but by far less. And the number and percentage of tenured positions has dropped significantly as universities rely more on contract or short-term faculty appointments.

Student life

Education reporters need to stay abreast of trends, issues, and controversies in student life by spending time on campuses and keeping in touch with students. They should know about the role of Greek life, athletics, drinking and party culture, crime and safety, town-gown relations, advocacy and support organizations for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students, low-income students, and minority groups. They should strive to produce journalism that captures the daily realities and interests of students, and not just the most high-profile or controversial stories.

Adult learners

Adult students, usually defined as those starting or returning to college after the age of 25, make up a growing share of the college population nationally, but relatively little attention is paid to their needs and outcomes. Education reporters must be aware of the crucial role community colleges and four-year institutions can play in retraining workers, serving nontraditional students, and educating veterans. They should know the history of the G.I. Bill, and its role in expanding college access.

Reporters should ask whether colleges have in place support structures for adult learners like extended office hours, evening classes, on-site child care, financial advising, counseling for veterans, and articulation agreements between community colleges and four-year colleges. Improving services for adult and other nontraditional students is crucial if colleges hope to boost their lackluster completion rates.

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