



State of the Education Beat 2021:

A Critical Profession at a Time of Crisis



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Cover images, clockwise from upper left: Adelle Whitefoot, Duluth News Tribune (credit: Adelle Whitefoot); Stephan Bisaha and Tom Shine, KLUW (KLUW); Dahlia Bazzaz, The Seattle Times (Dahlia Bazzaz); José Martínez, WFMZ-TV 69News (Tim Lind); and David Jesse, Detroit Free Press (Ryan Garza).



— José Martínez, WFMZ-TV 69News (Tim Lind)

State of the Education Beat 2021: A Critical Profession at a Time of Crisis

When we set out to produce the second State of the Education Beat report a year ago, no one knew a national crisis was around the corner. Yet shortly after the EdWeek Research Center launched the survey of education journalists that forms the backbone of this report, the United States entered a period of national emergency that has yet to abate.

With the nation in the grip of a pandemic that has wreaked havoc on schools and colleges, education is at the center of the news. The American public depends on education journalists to provide

need-to-know information, answer critical questions, and hold public officials accountable during a fast-moving and multifaceted crisis that has profoundly disrupted families and communities.

We wanted to tell the story of these storytellers, the committed professionals who cover education in communities across America. Providing insights into their views seemed particularly important at a time of troubling distrust in the nation's news media. To help us do that, we once again commissioned the EdWeek Research Center to carry out the research and produce this report.

America's education journalists know their work makes a real

impact and are committed to the field, the report makes clear. But they face a host of challenges, from harassment and hostility to limited newsroom resources that stretch them way too thin. Indeed, this report provides troubling evidence that conditions have not improved — and have in some ways worsened — since our first State of the Education Beat report, released in 2016.

EWA's mission is to strengthen the community of education writers and improve the quality of education coverage to better inform the public. Upon reviewing the results of the research reported here, it became clear that advancing that mission required that we issue a call to action.

Based on the findings of the study ably conducted by the EdWeek Research Center, EWA is issuing five recommendations. We chose to focus our calls for change on people in a position to help address the challenges this report outlines: newsroom leaders, educational institutions, and charitable foundations that support independent journalism on education.

We hope these leaders will listen to our message. We offer them our assistance in helping ensure that professional journalists can produce the high-quality coverage of education that the public relies on now more than ever.

The journalists who cover education strongly believe in the power of their storytelling to spur positive change. They deserve our unflagging support — and our gratitude — for their critically important work.



Caroline Hendrie
Executive Director, EWA
January 2021

The Education Writers Association would like to express our appreciation to the Carnegie Corporation of New York for providing major funding for this project through a generous grant to EWA. We also wish to thank The Wallace Foundation for providing additional financial assistance for the project.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In early 2020, just before the coronavirus pandemic started to send shock waves throughout the United States, the Education Writers Association partnered with the EdWeek Research Center to conduct a study of American education journalism. The project consisted of a survey of 419 education journalists, followed by phone interviews with 24 respondents who volunteered to respond to follow-up questions raised by survey results. This research project expanded upon the organization's first-ever State of the Education Beat study, conducted in 2015-16, by collecting updated demographic and job-related information while also delving more deeply into timely topics.

In 2020, as in 2015, education journalists expressed high levels of commitment to and confidence in their profession and its impact on schools. Eighty-three percent said education journalism is a career path they're committed to pursuing, up slightly from 78 percent five years earlier. And 98 percent said their work has had a positive impact on the community. Compared to five years earlier, a much larger share of education journalists *completely* (rather than generally) agreed that their work had a positive community impact (47 percent in 2020 versus 29 percent in 2015). Scores also grew more positive on the Education Journalism Confidence Index, calculated for the first time in 2015 to assess perceptions of the profession.

Despite these positive perceptions, education journalists face serious challenges as they go about their jobs reporting and editing news on preschool, elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education.

Equity was an overarching concern expressed by survey respondents, one that transcends personal experiences and challenges. Sixty-three percent of survey respondents said it is a major problem that education journalists, 82 percent of whom are white, are much less racially diverse than the students they cover. Most said that workforce diversification is the most important step in order to ensure coverage reflects the level of diversity of the student population. Equity was identified as the most important issue to cover over the next two years, according to survey respondents. It's also the most under-covered issue in education journalism today, they said. In interviews, education journalists drew a direct connection between the perceived shortages of coverage of this topic and the demographic makeup of the workforce.

Sixty-one percent have been verbally or physically threatened or harassed by their audiences and/or sources. More than 1 in 3 have had problems with hostile or uncooperative education leaders. Thirty-nine percent have had trouble gaining access to campuses — a finding that held true both for journalists surveyed before and after the pandemic temporarily shut down schools. And roughly 1 in 3 women and people of color reported facing gender or racial discrimination by audiences or sources of their education journalism.

These challenges are occurring in an era of diminished resources as the pandemic batters an already struggling news business: Education journalists said that financial difficulties and resource limitations are the No. 1 professional challenge they had faced in the past year. Resource limitations may be impacting news coverage: Public relations materials were the No. 1 source of information for education journalists in 2020, with 89 percent turning to communications firms,

Equity was identified as the most important issue to cover over the next two years, according to survey respondents. It's also the most under-covered issue in education journalism today, they said.

staff, or news releases more than once in the past month, despite the fact that survey respondents expressed low levels of confidence in the accuracy and timeliness of this type of information. In interviews, journalists said resource limitations often led them to consult PR people as a shortcut, even when they would prefer to rely on other sources instead.

In addition to assessing perceptions of the profession, the 2020 study also took advantage of survey respondents' broad and unique vantage point on policy and practice to ask whether U.S. education is going in the right or wrong direction. When it comes to K-12 schools, journalists were split down the middle, with roughly half saying they are going in the right direction and the other half saying they are not. Fifty-nine percent of education journalists said postsecondary education is going in the wrong direction for reasons including funding, student debt, and a perception that universities and colleges are bureaucratic, inefficient, and averse to innovation.

The 2021 State of the Education Beat report concludes with five recommendations based on the research findings:

- ✓ Given that in-depth **EDUCATION JOURNALISM** drives civic engagement and positively impacts communities, newsroom leaders should hold coverage of this essential topic in high regard and allocate resources accordingly.
- ✓ **NEWSROOM LEADERS** should improve the recruitment, hiring, and retention of nonwhite journalists and examine how demographic factors of their workforce other than race impact coverage.
- ✓ **NEWS ORGANIZATIONS** should direct more resources to covering issues of equity, poverty, and inequality, which education journalists see as the most important on the beat over the next two years.
- ✓ **SCHOOLS, COLLEGES, AND UNIVERSITIES** — especially those that receive public funding — must remove barriers to journalists' timely access to campuses, staff, and information.
- ✓ **PHILANTHROPIES** should step up efforts to fill gaps left by news industry contraction and should give grantees' greater latitude in what areas of education to cover.

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■ PART 1: Education Reporting in a Time of Crisis



— Adelle Whitefoot - Duluth News Tribune (Adelle Whitefoot)

Public education is a pillar of our democracy. So too is journalism—the only profession explicitly named and protected by the U.S. Constitution. At the intersection of these two core institutions is education journalism. The worldwide coronavirus pandemic that hit the United States in March 2020 has placed in stark relief the importance of education journalism as a means of ensuring an informed citizenry. In recent months, education journalists have provided information on remote learning in schools and universities, the impact of closures and reopenings on households and the economy, and other critical and timely topics. In the meantime, they have also examined the ways in which the racial justice demonstrations that swept the nation during the spring and summer of 2020 have raised issues with direct relevance to schools.

In the midst of this time of crisis and turmoil, EWA conducted its second-ever State of the Education Beat study. Like the first Education Beat study, which was conducted in 2015 and published in 2016, the new study was produced in partnership with the EdWeek Research Center, the nonprofit, nonpartisan independent research arm of Editorial Projects in Education. That first study collected the perspectives of education journalists using an online survey and phone interviews. The goal was to provide a broad, baseline perspective on a field

that, until that point, had seldom been examined in a systematic or comprehensive manner. The results contradicted several pieces of commonly accepted wisdom about the beat, such as the idea that education journalism relied on novices using the job as a stepping stone to a more prestigious position. Despite working in a news business that had experienced massive layoffs and cutbacks in recent decades, the 2015-16 study participants were remarkably optimistic about their field, according to the first-ever Education Journalism Confidence Index, which was developed for the report.

The objective of this second study was to build upon the first report's findings by again taking the pulse of the field with a survey and interviews that track what has and has not changed. The study also delved into issues that have arisen in the years since the first report, such as the impact of President Donald Trump's overtly hostile attitude toward the news media. Perhaps most importantly, the new study delved more deeply into equity-related issues, such as the mismatch between the demographics of education journalists, most of whom are white, and the students they cover, who are much more racially diverse.

The objective of this second study was to build upon the first report's findings by again taking the pulse of the field.

Methodology

The 38-question online survey for the project was launched on March 5, 2020, shortly before President Trump [declared](#) the coronavirus pandemic a national emergency. Days later, most schools and colleges closed their campuses, and many Americans stayed home for much of the spring. In 2020, as in 2015, respondents consisted of a combination of EWA member journalists and education journalists included on a commercial list of news media contacts.

A total of 419 eligible respondents filled out the questionnaire, with approximately 1 in 3 doing so prior to the declaration of the emergency order on March 13 and the remainder responding between

that time and when the survey closed on June 25. An EdWeek Research Center analysis did not find any statistically significant differences in the responses of journalists who took the survey at different points in time, including before the state of emergency was announced, immediately afterwards, and during each month that followed. This was likely because the questions had been crafted before the pandemic hit the United States and were designed to assess broad trends rather than to pinpoint the impact of the crisis.

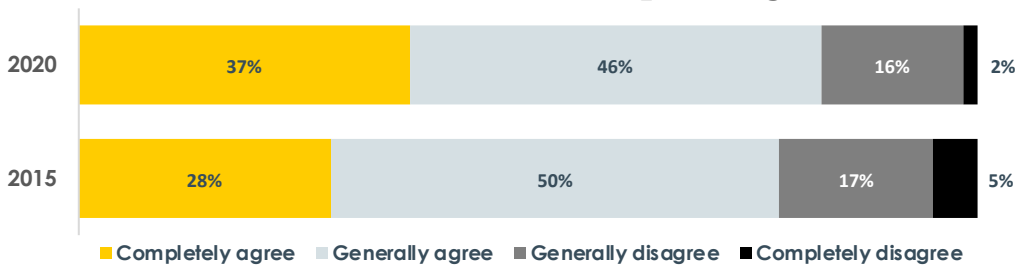
However, open-ended phone interviews conducted between July 13 and August 6 with 24 education journalists offered insights into the ways in which the pandemic, and ensuing racial justice protests, had impacted the field. Those insights are woven throughout the report.

¹In both 2020 and 2015, a small number of survey respondents (29 in 2020) were excluded from the analysis because EWA deemed that they were not education journalists. Those excluded included retirees who no longer worked in any form of education journalism and those working in public relations (e.g., a spokesperson for a school district). The total number of respondents (419) does not include those exclusions.

Education Journalists Committed to the Beat, See Real-World Impact

Two conclusions are crystal clear, based on responses to both the survey and the interviews. First, now more than ever, education journalists are committed to the beat. Although the job was previously stereotyped as a “beginners beat,” or a stepping stone to bigger and better things, 83 percent of 2020 survey respondents said education journalism is a career path they are committed to pursuing, up slightly from 78 percent in 2015.

Education journalism is a career path that I am committed to pursuing

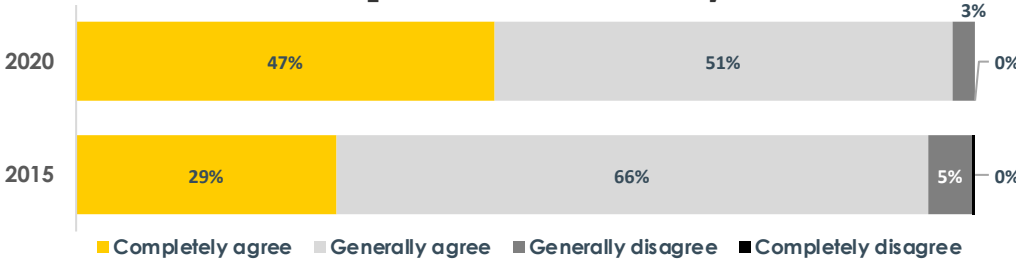


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Second, virtually all the 2020 survey respondents (97 percent) completely or generally agreed that their education journalism has a positive impact on the community. That share is similar to the results of the 2015 survey (95 percent). What has changed, however, is the share of journalists who *completely* agreed that their journalism’s impact is positive. That rate has skyrocketed, from 29 percent in 2015 to 47 percent today.

In interviews, journalists described dozens of examples of ways their work had helped to shape policy, reveal wrongdoing, steer resources to those in need, and simply help parents, students, practitioners, and the public understand an institution that impacted them deeply yet too often seemed frustratingly complex and opaque.

My education journalism makes a positive impact in the community



Challenge: “Fake News”

Education journalists might be committed to their work and confident in its potential to create meaningful change in the world. But the struggles are real.

Hostility and attacks ramped up as President Trump labeled the press “the enemy of the people” and routinely dismissed accurate reporting as “fake news.” Police and demonstrators alike have lashed out against reporters covering demonstrations. And economic forces beyond journalists’ control have continued to shutter news outlets and reduce resources.

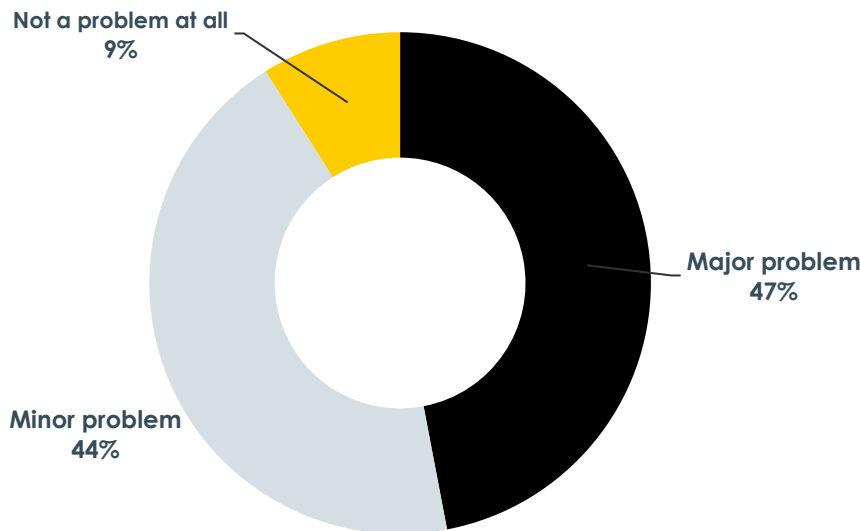
Education journalism is not exempt from these forces: Nearly half of respondents said that fake news and information is a major problem for the field, while nearly as many believe it’s a minor issue. Interview results suggest that this may mean that education journalists believe they are falsely and unfairly accused of generating fake news.

In an interview, one journalist described a story that took her three months, a piece she reviewed meticulously and repeatedly with her editor, examining it from all angles to make sure it was accurate and fair.

“And what do they do?” she said of her outlet’s audience. “They come at you [with], ‘This is shoddy reporting, fake news, your biases are showing.’ So it’s an attempt to undermine my professionalism. I get bothered by that because I try really hard to be fair and that’s what most people tell me is: ‘You’re overly fair. ... There’s no hint of opinion.’ So when somebody claims that I’m doing something because I have an agenda, that frustrates me.”

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Do you think the issue of fake news and misinformation is a major problem, a minor problem, or not a problem at all for education journalism today?



We asked education journalists how their work had impacted the community.



Here's what they said.

"When the coronavirus shut down schools, we had some school districts ... that said 'Well, we just can't do this. We can't feed y'all anymore.' I kind of made a daily Twitter thread about it and one by one those **districts would open back up and start feeding kids again** and I was told by multiple people that that level of spotlight and exposure is what got some of those districts back online feeding kids again."

"There's a Confederate monument that had ... been talked about for years, decades really, about its **controversial presence**. ...We were able to **educate the public** and that had a positive impact on what eventually happened with the university taking it down to help people understand that decision."

"When the Parkland shootings happened, I organized a **community forum with teachers and students** within a couple of weeks and on a very slushy New England evening, we had more than 100 people turn out on a Tuesday or Wednesday night."

"We've seen [a university] where **extensive reporting** ... revealed all kinds of issues, [and] led to two presidents there being forced out because of [our] reporting."

"We've looked into **lower income and more diverse preschool programs** in our area and started relationships with them to where we're telling their stories ... And now they're getting the word out about their programs. They're getting grants ... and they're able to serve more students."

"I've got a superintendent right now who's emailing me every day as he gets **ready to open his school system [during the pandemic]** saying, 'We really appreciate your coverage, really appreciate it's non-biased. Appreciate you bringing us the facts. You get us **information quicker than the state department** does sometimes.'"



Challenge: Hostility and Harassment

Cute kindergarteners. Happy graduates. Nurturing educators who bring to mind your favorite teacher.

Education journalists do get to cover some pretty pleasant topics.

So outsiders to the field might assume that, when it comes to hostility and harassment that has become de rigueur for their peers covering politics, crime, or other seemingly more controversial subjects, education journalists have it easy.

They would be wrong.

Hostility and harassment have become so ubiquitous that they are almost background music on the education beat.

“I don’t know that I’ve ever been threatened,” a freelancer said, then added almost as an afterthought, “with the exception of these lawsuits I mentioned.”

Often in a similarly off-hand manner, other education journalists described experiencing harassment, including menacing or inappropriate late-night phone calls, police pat downs, and even death threats. Often these efforts at intimidation follow on the heels of press coverage of hot-button issues like immigration and race, or other topics that evoke strong feelings, like college sports.

“Last fall, there was a ... football player who was arrested, and I wrote a story based off the police camera footage and some of the emails that were sent to the university president,” a newspaper reporter said. “I got a lot of really angry tweets and emails calling me a terrible human being, a joke of a journalist. ... I find that usually happens when I write about the sports teams; [that’s] when I get the most intense hatred from fans.”

Overall, 61 percent of survey respondents said they had been verbally or physically threatened or harassed by sources and/or people who consume their education journalism,

How, if at all, have you been verbally or physically threatened or harassed by audiences or sources of your education journalism? Please select all that apply.



with threats most frequently coming via email, Facebook, or Twitter.

Women are threatened more often. The data show that more than two out of three female education journalists have faced threats, compared with just under half of men.

One female newspaper reporter described a disturbing situation she experienced while questioning a superintendent after a school board forum. A parent group that supported the district leader crowded in to listen to the interview.

“After it had ended, ... I wouldn’t say they threatened me, but I felt uncomfortable because I was all alone and they were just sort of attacking me and attacking my work and saying that, ‘My 10-year-old daughter could write better than you.’”

Increasingly uncomfortable, the journalist made her way to her car as soon as she could and drove away.

Challenge: Uncooperative Education Leaders

In addition to facing harassment and threats from audiences, education journalists also increasingly encounter hostile or uncooperative education leaders.

Since the first State of the Education Beat survey in 2015, the share of respondents saying education leaders are uncooperative or hostile has increased from 23 percent to 34 percent. The issue is especially widespread at the state and local levels. Thirty-nine percent of state and local journalists said they’ve had problems with hostile or uncooperative education leaders as compared to 21 percent of those who report nationally.

In interviews, education journalists provided examples that are both telling and diverse:

- A superintendent of a major urban district who never once granted an interview to a reporter assigned to the beat
- A college that called a news conference, then refused to accept any questions from reporters
- A public university president and his entourage who simply stood up and left the room during a prearranged interview once a reporter started asking pointed questions
- A district where leaders refused for several hours to communicate with the news media about reports of gunshots fired at a school, leading parents and students to panic, even though the district knew soon after the incident that the noise had actually come from an air conditioner that exploded without injuring anyone. “I can’t imagine what the parents were going through,” marveled a journalist who covered the story.

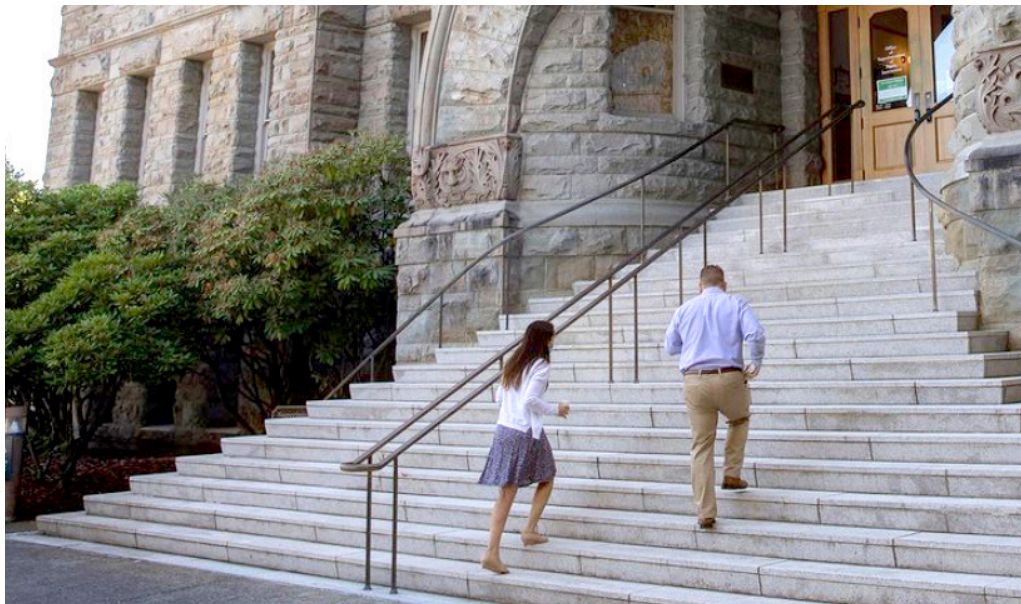
Even when stonewalling isn’t causing parents to needlessly fear for their children’s lives, it can place major limits on citizens’ ability to influence or even just understand important decisions, journalists said in interviews.

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In some cases, the lack of cooperation is so far-reaching that news outlets are forced to pay for attorneys to obtain information that should be publicly available. Other times, when there's just no money for such expenses, major stories run without key information. Sometimes, they never run at all.

A journalist less than a year into her first reporting job expressed frustration at being unable, thus far, to get her hands on the information she needed to run a story about a charter school network that had ignored her formal and informal requests to nail down the exact number of full-time substitutes and uncertified teachers it employed.

"There's not a lot of full-time, certified teachers in the building still, even after they had issues with it in the past," she said. "So I think that's something parents deserve to know."



— Dahlia Bazzaz, The Seattle Times (Ellen Banner)

In addition to encountering more widespread resistance from education leaders, survey respondents were also more likely in 2020 to have difficulty gaining in-person access to campuses and schools.

Challenge: Closing Campuses to Journalists

In addition to encountering more widespread resistance from education leaders, survey respondents were also more likely in 2020 to have difficulty gaining in-person access to campuses and schools. In the past year, in-person access has been a challenge for 39 percent of education journalists, up from 33 percent in 2015. Although some respondents took the survey after COVID-19 had shuttered most campuses in March 2020, there was no difference between the share of respondents who reported challenges related to in-person access before versus after these closures.

The problem, however, was particularly pronounced at the K-12 level. Forty-three percent of journalists who focused on K-12 education said they had trouble accessing schools, compared with 28 percent of those who covered postsecondary education.

In some cases, access-related challenges are harrowing, physically threatening, and stark. One education reporter said he was physically removed from a school building by a burly principal unhappy that a teacher had invited him into the classroom. Another told of being harassed by school security guards who attempted to physically intimidate her and threatened to confiscate her camera even though she was standing on a public sidewalk outside the school. At one point, they even used the sirens on their squad cars to drown out the voices of the students she was attempting to interview as she walked with them down a public street that was not part of the school's campus.

Other times, journalists are simply unable to access a particular school in any way, for any amount of time. For instance, during COVID-related school closures, one journalist said the district she covered made a rule that no one but students and teachers could participate in virtual meetups or classrooms during remote learning.

"That meant that we, as journalists, could not listen to any of the classes going on remotely, period," she said. "We just couldn't."

A different but related problem occurs when school officials grant a level of access that is so brief, so difficult to arrange, and/or so tightly controlled that journalists have trouble doing their jobs.

"It takes an enormous amount of advance footwork and lobbying," one education journalist said of past efforts to arrange in-person visits to campus. "I'm thinking of an experience last year, where I was allowed on a community college campus, but I was allowed no freedom to walk around on my own. ... I was a business reporter for many years and covering schools feels like covering a secret business sometimes."

Journalists who experienced difficulties accessing campus lamented the negative effects on news coverage and public awareness. Difficulties with access has delayed, curtailed, or even killed stories, they said, leaving the public with partial or inaccurate information. In addition, several journalists observed that when journalists are expelled from campus, stories can be less compelling or even comprehensible because they lack photos, quotations, or audio footage to help show what's going on in schools.

One journalist discussed how his difficulties accessing campuses impacted his efforts to cover the rise of restorative justice in schools as an alternative to traditional disciplinary practices.

"It's really difficult sometimes to understand [this] education buzzword called restorative justice," the journalist said. "Yet I'm sure you've heard of it a million times at this point. Even trying to explain it is difficult to a lay person, because it really is a different approach than we're used to in terms of discipline. I've not had an opportunity to experience [it], except on a few ... limited occasions. ... I would benefit from more in-person experiences of what that looks like in person, to really better explain to readers, especially lay readers, what that means in practice."

Another journalist suggested that the coronavirus pandemic has starkly revealed the impact of years of educator efforts to keep journalists off campuses.

Journalists who experienced difficulties accessing campus lamented the negative effects on news coverage and public awareness. Difficulties with access has delayed, curtailed, or even killed stories, they said, leaving the public with partial or inaccurate information.

“There’s certainly a disconnect between [the] public’s perception of what happens in schools and what actually happens in schools, which is something that’s really become interesting in the last six months because kids [have] brought their schools home with them,” he observed. “So, parents were really able to see for the first time what their kids do throughout the day.”



— David Jesse, Detroit Free Press (Ryan Garza)

Overall, just over a quarter of survey respondents said the size of their education news staff has decreased in the past two years, while just under a quarter said it has grown.

Challenge: Economic Constraints

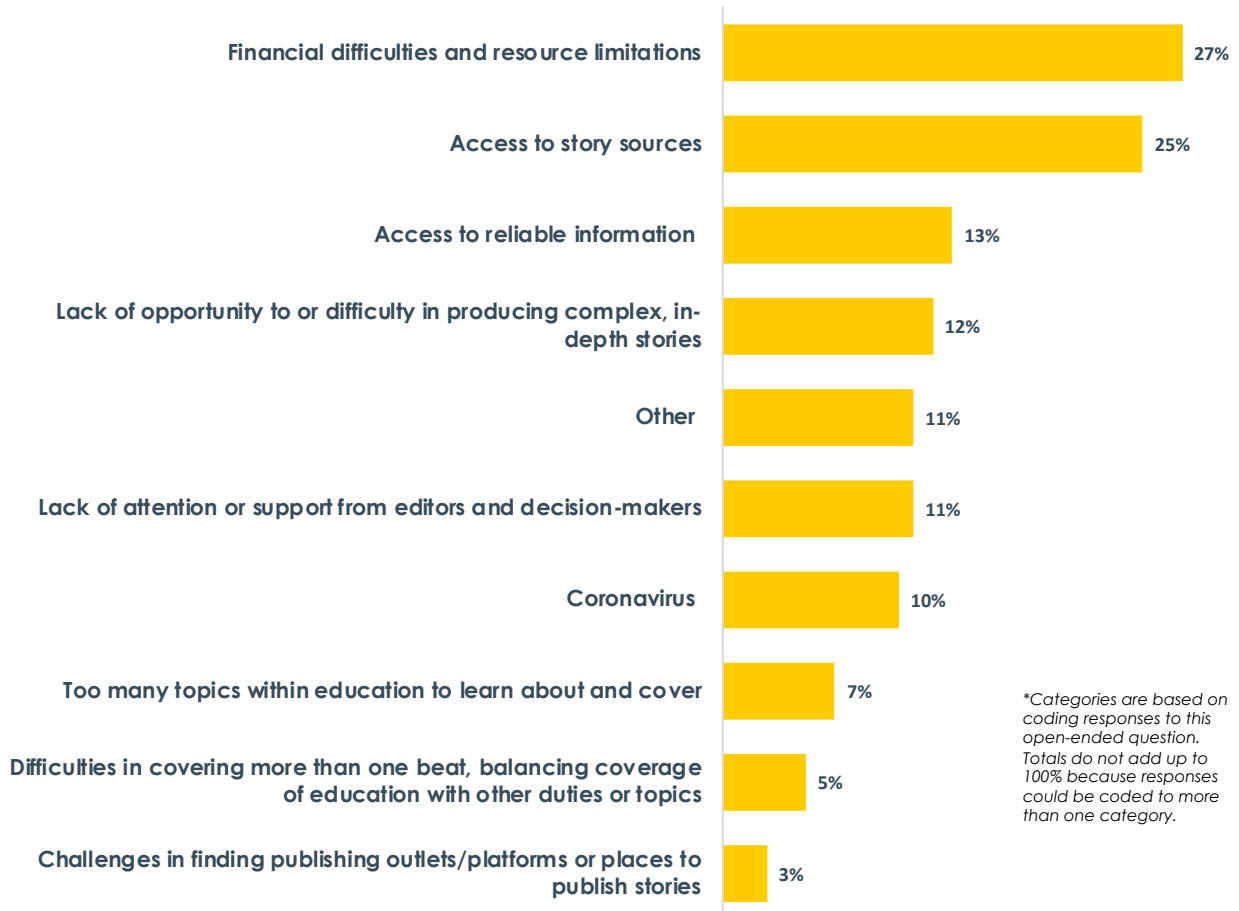
Like their colleagues in other areas of the news business, education journalists face all of these challenges in an environment of diminishing resources and low pay. The nation’s six largest publicly traded newspaper companies in particular, which never fully recovered from financial losses experienced during the Great Recession of 2008, saw advertising revenue decline by 42 percent year over year when the pandemic hit during the second quarter of 2020.

In response to an open-ended question, survey respondents were most likely to say financial difficulties and resource limitations are their biggest work-related challenge.

“I think it will be a miracle if I am in this job in a year,” one newspaper journalist said. “I believe local journalism is doomed in the next couple of years unless some powerful local groups with money step up and buy back their legacy papers in cities across America.”

The financial constraints have impacted the resources available for education journalism. Overall, just over a quarter of survey respondents said the size of their education news staff has decreased in the past two years, while just under a quarter said it has grown. However, those totals mask important differences between the general-interest outlets that have borne the brunt of the recent blows to the media business and education-focused outlets, many of them grant-supported,

Aside from the fact that there are not enough hours in the day, what has been the biggest challenge to your education journalism in the last 12 months?*

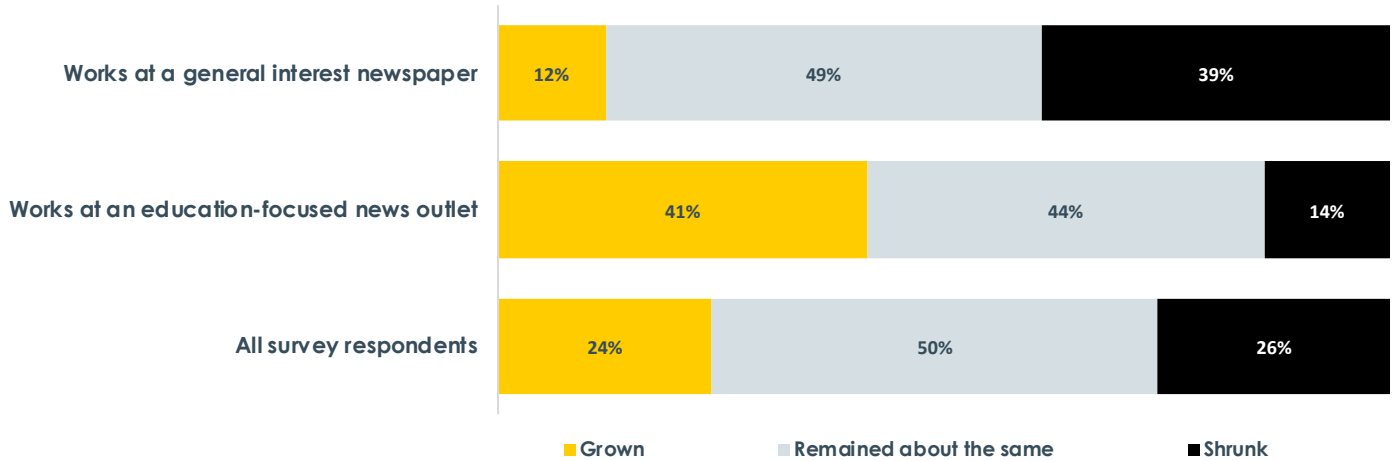


which have been expanding to fill the void left behind by the decimation of local news.

Just 12 percent of survey respondents at general-interest newspapers said their education staffs have grown in the past two years, while 39 percent said they have declined. Among journalists at education-focused outfits, the reverse is true: 41 percent reported increases in staff sizes and 14 percent reported declines.

“When I was an intern eight years ago, we had five P-12 education reporters,” said one newspaper journalist in response to the survey question about on-the-job challenges. “As of this year, the only P-12 education reporter on our staff is me.”

During the past two years, has the size of your education news staff grown, shrunk, or remained about the same?



By contrast, the nonprofit, education news-focused Chalkbeat network reported in its [strategic plan](#) that its annual revenue has more than doubled in the past two years, to \$12 million.

This is not to say education-focused outlets — most of which are nonprofit — are free of financial concerns or constraints.

An employee at one education-focused nonprofit discussed the challenges associated with “competing responsibilities” she encountered when required to work as a journalist while also helping to raise money for her employer. Another journalist said her biggest challenge was the “confines” of the grants that pay the bills at many education-focused nonprofits — which lead to narrow beats and “safe” topics. Often, these grants require news outlets to devote a certain amount of coverage or manpower to the funders’ pet topics, although there’s typically no guarantee that topic will be portrayed in a favorable or unfavorable manner.

For the individual education journalist, the field is not a path to riches. The typical full-time education journalist earns \$65,000 annually after seven years of experience in a field where it’s rare to find anyone with less than a bachelor’s degree. The typical education journalist working full-time at a general-interest newspaper has slightly less experience (six years) and earns \$45,000. At general-interest newspapers, an education journalist with less than five years of experience earns an average salary of \$43,000. The average starting salary for college graduates was about \$51,000 in 2019, according to the National Association of Colleges and Employers.

■ PART 2: Racial and Socioeconomic Equity



Natalie Pate, Statesman Journal (Connor Radnovich)

The Racial Mismatch

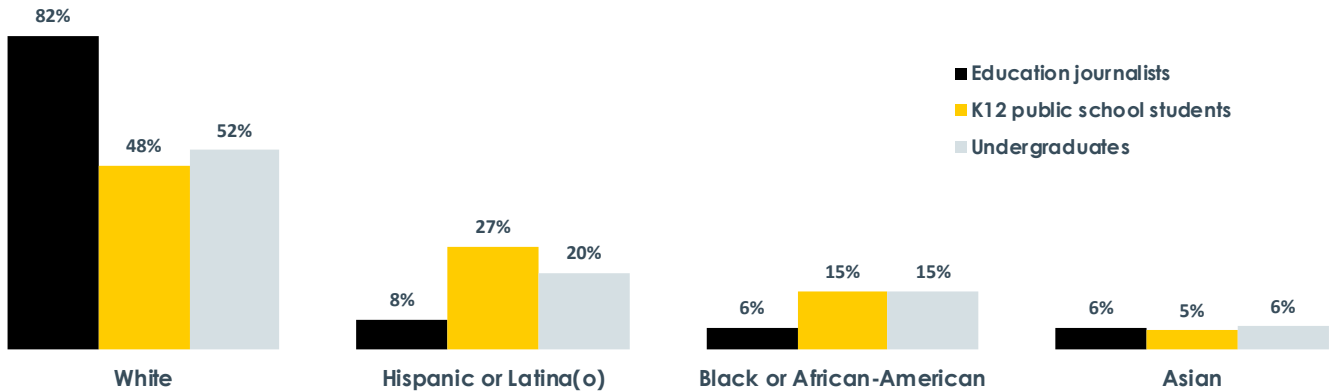
The first time EWA conducted its State of the Education Beat survey in 2015, the vast majority of education journalists who responded (84 percent) were white. In 2020, that share dropped only slightly to 82 percent.

Yet K-12 and postsecondary populations are increasingly diverse, creating a growing mismatch between the people who cover education and the students who participate in it.

The majority of education journalists surveyed (63 percent) viewed this demographic mismatch as a major problem. However, perceptions vary dramatically by age, with more than three-quarters of Millennials saying it's a major problem, compared with just over half of Generation X journalists and less than 40 percent of Baby Boomers.

In follow-up interviews, numerous respondents said the racial mismatch causes white education journalists to miss stories or leave out important information because they lack context they might have acquired through lived experience. An additional challenge, they said, is that white education journalists may feel uncomfortable interviewing people of color who, in turn, may feel uncomfortable being interviewed by them.

Racial demographics: Education journalists vs. student populations*



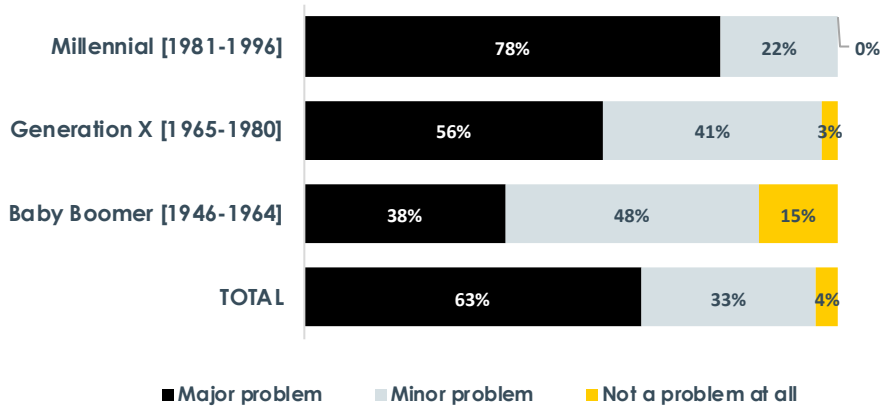
*SOURCE: State of the Education Beat study, U.S. Department of Education

“You still have people who just will not cover certain stories because they’re not comfortable, because they’ve never been exposed to people who are from whatever demographic,” said a white, male reporter at an education-focused outlet. “They weren’t ever forced to do it in college. They never met people who weren’t like them in high school. They may understand the big concepts ... but they haven’t actually gotten out of their comfort zones. ... This is also particularly dangerous at this moment in time when we are all quarantined. We’re in our houses. And in many cases ... it’s not shoe-leather [reporting] anymore. It’s pick up the phone. So how do you learn to talk to different people if you’re just sequestered in your office all day?”

Another white education reporter described the steep learning curve she faced when assigned to cover historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs).

“I knew of historically Black colleges, but I knew absolutely nothing about them,” she said. “It took me a while to gain some understanding of the way issues [in higher education] might be

Education journalists are more likely to be white than are students. Do you think this is a major problem, a minor problem, or not a problem at all for education journalism today?



perceived differently or might affect historically Black colleges differently.”

In communities with larger populations of people who are not fully fluent in English or don’t speak it at all, communication can be a challenge. That may be especially problematic when reporting on potentially sensitive topics where misunderstandings can be common, even in the absence of language barriers.

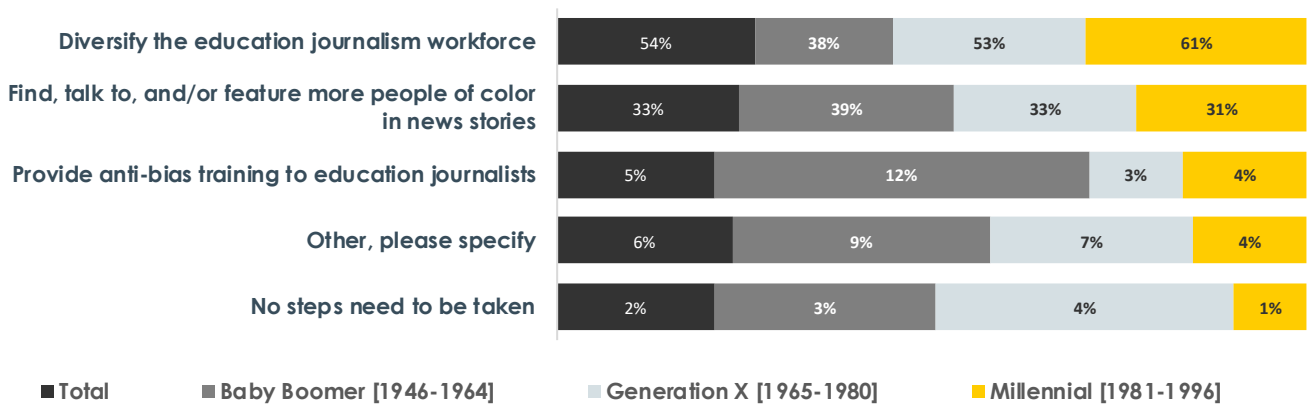
“I can have very basic conversations [in Spanish] sometimes with students or families to help them feel comfortable,” a newspaper reporter said. “But I have a barrier when it comes to that. ... As a reporter, you have an influence on how someone feels. They’re nervous that they’re going to say something wrong anyway, ... so how do you deal with that?”

Addressing the Mismatch

Asked what, if anything, should be done about the demographic mismatch, most survey respondents (54 percent) said the priority should be diversifying the education journalism workforce. However, again, opinions diverged by generation, with Baby Boomers significantly more likely than their younger peers to prioritize other steps, such as featuring more people of color in news coverage or providing anti-bias training to journalists.

Although workforce diversification was the most popular solution to decreasing the race/ethnicity mismatch between journalists and students, survey respondents also offered less sweeping suggestions. These included partnering with student newspapers at schools serving

In your opinion, what is the most important step to take when it comes to making education news coverage better reflect the level of racial/ethnic diversity of the student population?



substantial numbers of students of color, encouraging white journalists to read about and research the impacts of structural racism, building mutually trusting relationships with sources who are people of color rather than just approaching them in times of crisis, attending carefully to the language used to describe different groups, and seeking feedback from colleagues who are people of color — if those colleagues are comfortable playing that role.

Racial Discrimination

On the survey, education journalists were asked if they had ever been discriminated against on any basis by people outside their workplace who interacted with them during their work as an education journalist. Forty-two percent said they had.

One in 3 people of color (and 2 percent of white survey respondents) said they had faced discrimination related to their race and/or ethnicity. (Because education journalism is so heavily white, we are only able to provide survey results for white respondents as compared to people of color. There were too few respondents of any other race to reliably provide results for specific groups.)

In an interview, a Black education journalist described a harrowing experience that occurred when she was up for a promotion at her news organization. Years earlier, a member of this journalist's family had filed a racial discrimination lawsuit against one of her employer's advertisers. Someone at this organization learned of the education journalist's pending promotion and made a concerted effort to scuttle it, even going so far as to approach the news outlet's senior leadership and owners, threatening to pull advertising dollars if the promotion occurred.

Ultimately, the campaign failed and the journalist was promoted. In the end, she did not actually view the incident as racial discrimination. In fact, when asked if she had ever been discriminated against in the course of her work as an education journalist, she said no.

However, she did add:

“Discrimination can be very soft in the sense that you don't even know you're being discriminated against. I may be eating steak and think, ‘Oh, this is delicious.’ And then maybe it will be delicious until you find out the other person has steak, potato salad, dessert, and a drink. So, everything's relative.”

The Socioeconomic Gap

In interviews, respondents emphasized the need to offer financial support to aspiring journalists from low-income families while they are still in college, and possibly beyond.

This desire gets at another demographic mismatch: Education journalists are less likely than the students they cover to grow up in low-income families.

At any one point, roughly half of public school students live at or near the poverty line as defined by eligibility for free or reduced-price school meals. And even more qualify for subsidized meals at some point during their K-12 schooling.

Education journalists are less likely than the students they cover to grow up in low-income families.

Yet just 18 percent of survey respondents said they had ever qualified for free or reduced-price meals during their own years in K-12 schooling. While this doesn't mean that they grew up in the lap of luxury, it does indicate that the typical education journalist comes from a family with more resources than the family of the typical American public school student. After all, nearly every education journalist has a bachelor's degree as compared to 33 percent of the American public. And graduating from college is more challenging if one's family has less money to assist with tuition and living expenses.

Several interviewees suggested that hiring managers exacerbated the socioeconomic gap by favoring interns and employees who had not only attended college but who had attended pricier colleges that are perceived as prestigious.

"In one of the positions that we were looking [to fill], there were two candidates," a white education journalist said. "One of them had gone to a not-very-fancy college and had worked at a community [news outlet] and had done a little [work in our media], but not much. This is actually the Latina reporter that we wound up hiring."

"Who gets into fancy schools?" this journalist asked rhetorically.

"More people of privilege get into the fancy schools and then they have the connections to get the good internship. Then from their internship, they have the connections to get the good job. And then it just becomes like, 'Oh well, this person has more experience.' But the reason why that person has more experience is because they had all the privileges along the way."

She added: "We can train somebody to be a good journalist. We can't train somebody to have the perspective that they have."

However, a Black education journalist said it is wrong to presume that demographic diversity of any type would automatically lead to a diversification of perspectives.

"It can be a bit of a mistake, a little too much on the corrective side, to assume that getting a group of people who have this diversity together, visually diverse, culturally, what have you, gender, that there's going to be automatically a difference in perspective," he said. "If ... everybody thinks the same, or has the same political perspective, is it really diverse? Because those things [also] inform how we report, and how we edit, how we write headlines, who we talk to, who we don't, and the angle we have on journalism. So, I think it's important, that's probably undebatable, that there be diversity of all kinds in writing, reporting, editing, decision making."

Equity as an Urgent Issue

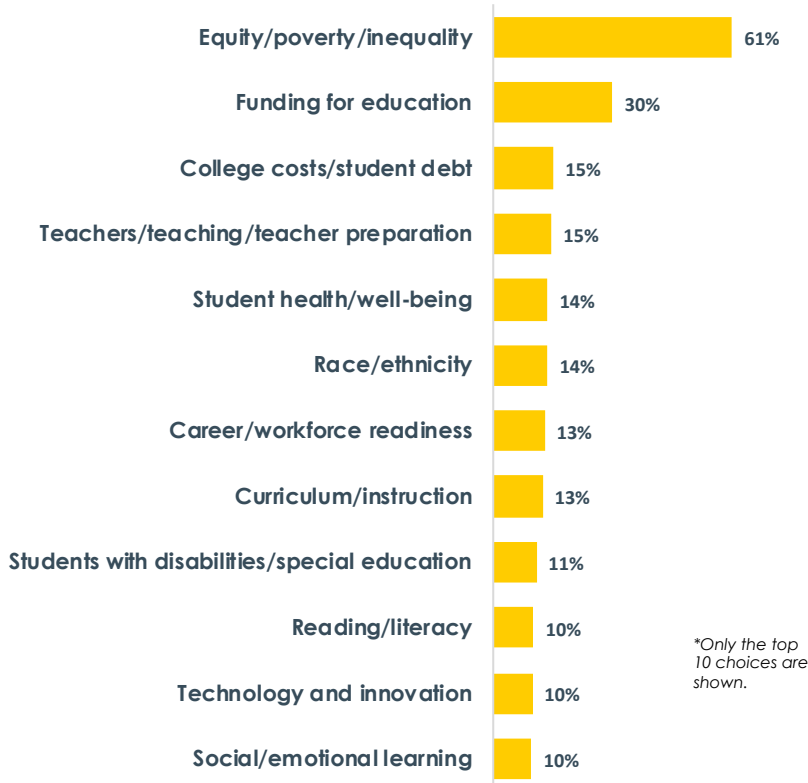
Despite the fact that they could choose among more than 20 different topics listed on the survey, 61 percent of education journalists identified equity/poverty/inequality as one of the three most important education stories of the next two years. Funding took second place, with 30 percent of the vote.

"It's certainly one of the most important topics that our newsroom covers," one education journalist said of equity. "In fact, arguably, issues of educational equity and poverty and race

In the words of one education journalist:

"We can train somebody to be a good journalist. We can't train somebody to have the perspective that they have."

Over the next two years, which of the following topics are the most important for education journalists to cover? Please select three.*



In interviews, education journalists offered multiple reasons for the urgency of covering equity.

are really the reason that our newsroom was even founded.”

Another education journalist described how an emphasis on equity is infused into her organizational culture:

“I know our newsroom, we’ve had conversations recently, especially after the killing of George Floyd and now with another recession, that we’re going to be focusing on that angle a lot in our reporting. And we plan in every story to look back and say, ‘How did we cover race in that story? How did we cover economic issues in that story?’”

In interviews, education journalists offered multiple reasons for the urgency of covering equity. They noted that it is pervasive and impacts large numbers of people. They associated the urgency with the common belief that education is meant to be the nation’s great equalizer.

“Education is one of the last spheres we have in American life where we all agree, or most

of the country agrees, on a high principle of what exactly people should get,” a national education editor said. “Most constituencies agree [that] equal access to education is a core value, a core service that everyone needs if they’re going to have a fair shot in life, in the American context anyway. At the same time, the details of what exactly that means and whether we as a society have been willing to offer that are pretty clearly points of huge disagreement across society.”

Journalists also suggested that the racial justice protests of 2020, coupled with the impact of the worldwide pandemic, had elevated the profile of inequity by amplifying and exposing pre-existing problems.

“We always hear that kids [from low-income families] lose a couple of months with the summer slide,” one education reporter said. “Well, now you’ve got going on six months of not being in a classroom and then the possibility of classes being in and out over the next two years. So I think you could be looking at, ... educationally speaking, a catastrophic event for an entire generation of kids coming up, and we have to cover that.”

In interviews, journalists identified dozens of equity-related stories they planned to cover in the next two years.

Those included tracking the pandemic’s impact on everything from ongoing desegregation efforts to college-dorm access. Interviewees also said they plan to highlight the experiences of students with disabilities, people who are LGBTQ, families living in low-income, rural areas, and others who have historically struggled with challenges in colleges and schools. The goal is to draw compelling comparisons between institutions that serve low-income and affluent students. They also want to examine teacher and faculty diversity and turnover patterns.

The new results are not directly comparable because the question was posed in an open-ended format in 2015. But equity appears to have grown in urgency in the past five years.

In 2015, equity and race/ethnicity tied for second place, with 11 percent of education journalists identifying them as the biggest upcoming topics to cover. Funding and testing tied for first place in 2015, with 20 percent of the vote. Although funding remains top of mind, testing appears to have declined in perceived importance, placing 14th in 2020. This may be due in part to the decreased emphasis on test-based accountability in the wake of the late 2015 reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Other topics receiving relatively less attention in 2020 than in 2015 are safety and security and school choice.

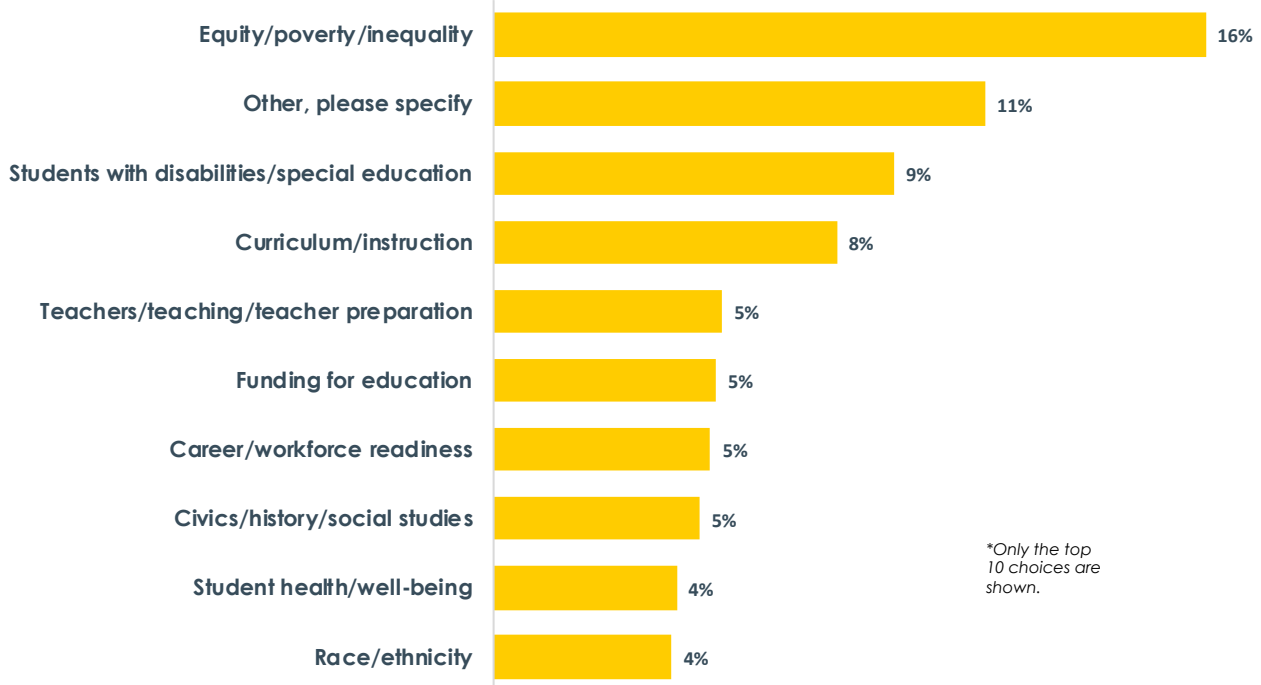
The Most Under-Covered Issue in Education

One thing that hasn’t changed since 2015 is the view that equity is the most under-covered topic on the beat. (Again, results are not directly comparable since the 2015 question was open-ended.)

In the words of a national education editor:

“Education is one of the last spheres we have in American life where we all agree, or most of the country agrees, on a high principle of what exactly people should get.”

What is the most under-covered issue in education today?*



In interviews, however, several education journalists suggested that the topic was not so much under-covered as poorly covered.

“We read a lot of stories that fall into a couple of easy tranches,” a national education editor said. “We’ll look at data and say, ‘OK, school districts have massively different tax bases, or you can see the differences in outcomes in graduation rates by race, by in some cases location.’ Or we’ll do a [feature] story about how person A or person X has it so hard, but has persevered. But what you don’t see, or haven’t seen, is a widespread, across different outlets, [examination of] the way the system is set up, and actually questioning the institutions themselves and their very existence, and the way that they’re functioning. Whether it’s a local school district or a private college or university, I think we give a lot of them a pass and [they] have not had ... accountability. [We have not been] questioning ... the way that they systematically work.”

Others interviewed said equity was neither under-covered nor poorly covered; it was simply covered too seldom relative to its importance and magnitude. And still others suggested that, while the topic attracts a fair amount of coverage from education journalists, they believe it can’t possibly receive enough attention because inequities remain so stark.

Most interviewees, however, said the topic is covered too little. And several drew a bright line between their perceptions of under-coverage and the demographics of education journalists.

“I think in our field we’re still not as diverse as we need to be, and sometimes we’re missing those stories for reasons [such as] reporters not being comfortable working or talking with the demographic that’s different than them or maybe just not equipped to be asking the right questions that we need to tell those stories,” observed an education journalist who is a person of color.

Others said the topic, which is deep, persistent, and complex, tends to get lost in the shuffle due to pressures to feed the daily news beast, especially at local newspapers that aren’t focused exclusively on education.

“You don’t always have much time to delve into maybe bigger, broader issues,” an education reporter at one such newspaper said. “You’re so much more concerned [with] the more immediate things like school board meetings and immediate decisions.”

Education journalists also said that equity could be tough to sell to editors — and audiences.

“The majority of people in [my state tend to say], ‘Well I picked myself up [by] my bootstraps so you have to do the same,’” said one journalist who has sometimes struggled to interest editors and readers in equity-focused coverage.

Another journalist proposed that the news values embraced by the field itself could make it challenging to cover equity.

“I think there’s a tendency in education journalism to cover education as an industry and as a business, and to look at it from a leadership perspective,” she said. “While that’s valuable and it’s also important, that means there’s probably stories that we’ve been neglecting and are catching up on now when it comes to inequalities among students and who’s getting the most benefit.”

Finally, several education journalists suggested that the complexity of the subject made it challenging for some of their less-experienced peers to cover.

“I think it took me having mentors and going to ... EWA seminars and stuff like that to realize that that was something I needed to be doing,” one Millennial education journalist said.

Interviewees identified dozens of aspects of equity that they believe are under-covered, including access to technology, stories that dive deeply into which expenses school district budgets prioritize, as well as explorations of the educational experiences of first-generation and minority college students, immigrants, teen parents, and transgender students.

Although educational inequities remain a persistent problem that is unlikely to be solved anytime soon, several education journalists said that news coverage of the issue is improving.

“When I first started, ... I felt a little bit like a voice in the wilderness,” one education journalist said. “I didn’t feel people were focusing on that. But now, I see just a lot of outstanding reporting being done on these issues.”

Although educational inequities remain a persistent problem that is unlikely to be solved anytime soon, several education journalists said that news coverage of the issue is improving.

■ PART 3: How Education Journalists View Education



—Samantha West, USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin (Dan Powers)

When it comes to teaching and learning, education journalists have a unique perspective. Most people derive their knowledge of education purely from their personal experiences as students and/or parents of students. Educators and others who work in schools have a broader vantage point, but one that is also strongly shaped by their individual experiences with their own students. Certainly, the viewpoints of all of these groups — students, alumni, parents, and educators — are valuable.

Yet most if not all lack the opportunity afforded to education journalists on a regular basis to take a step back and gather information and outlooks from people and places outside of their personal spheres. To inform their work, education journalists typically seek out a diverse mix of educators, students, researchers, policymakers, and advocates, as well as local, state, and federal officials, to name a few. For this reason, EWA decided in 2020 to ask education journalists for the first time two broad survey questions about education. The first concerns whether public elementary, middle, and high school education was going in the right or wrong direction. The second asked the same about higher education.

T. Keung Hui, The News & Observer (Juliette Grimmett)



Interviewees also said K-12 failed to attract and retain excellent teachers, that high schools graduated students unprepared for college or careers, and that policymakers relied on ideological or religious beliefs rather than on evidence.

K-12 Education

When it comes to the K-12 sphere, journalists were evenly split. Half said it’s going in the right direction, half said it’s not. However, a majority of education journalists who spend at least some of their time covering K-12 education said the field is going in the right direction, compared to just over 1 in 3 of those who focus exclusively on postsecondary schooling.

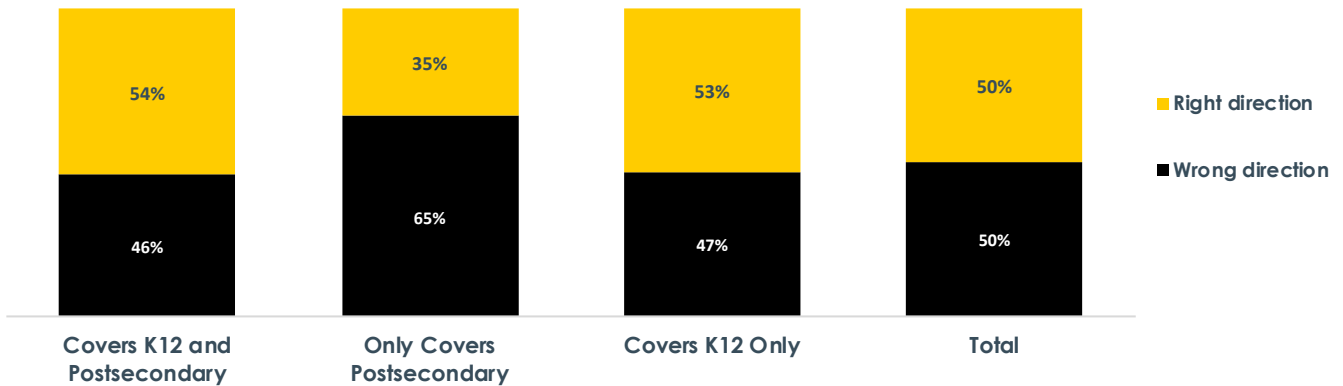
“[Schools are] taking on the role of health care and education and social services,” said a journalist who focuses exclusively on K-12 at an education-focused outlet. “I don’t know if schools, just a few years ago, had food pantries next to the principal’s office, where kids who don’t have access to the meals at home are able to take home canned goods or loaves of bread, toiletries, stuff like that. ... Schools taking on more of a leadership role in, frankly raising kids, would imply that schools are headed in the right direction.”

Other reasons why some education journalists say K-12 is going in the right direction include rising high school graduation rates, a sense that a narrow focus on standardized testing has been replaced with a more holistic approach to accountability, and the belief that schools are increasingly taking into account research on how students learn.

That said, half of education journalists said K-12 is going in the wrong direction.

Funding is a major reason, with multiple journalists interviewed saying schools need more money, especially those that serve students from low-income families. Interviewees also said K-12 failed to attract and retain excellent teachers, that high schools graduated students unprepared for college or careers, and that policymakers relied on ideological or religious beliefs

Thinking about the public education system, that is public elementary, middle, and high schools in the United States today... Do you think the public education system in the U.S. is generally going in the:



rather than on evidence. For example, one education reporter criticized lawmakers in his state for focusing on abstinence-based sex education even though [it has not been shown to reduce](#) rates of teen pregnancy and may actually contribute to increases.

Interestingly, journalists pointed to schools’ response to the pandemic as a portent of both good and bad things to come.

“I worry about, nationally ... support for public education overall,” one education journalist said. “Particularly with coronavirus and how some public schools are choosing not to open for safety reasons ... [Many] parents ... really want their schools to open and now the schools are not opening.”

Yet one of her peers saw the response to COVID-19 as a sign of the K-12 system’s strength.

“I think especially going through the pandemic, people have done their best to still serve students and make sure that they have access to resources,” she said. “While that might not be exactly what people wanted it to look like, ... I do see the effort of people to try to keep students involved in learning.”

Postsecondary Education

Although journalists were split down the middle on their views of K-12 education, they were more negative when it came to evaluating the direction of postsecondary education. A majority (59 percent) said colleges and universities are headed in the wrong direction. These results

are nearly identical to the findings of a [2018 Pew Research Center](#) survey that asked a similar question of the American public.

“They’re focusing on some of the wrong stuff,” one education journalist said. “They’re focusing on some of the splashy stuff. They’re focusing on the stuff that gooses rankings, instead of actually what students need to graduate ready for the job market.”

Other phrases interviewees used to describe higher ed included “disconnected,” “stagnant,” “bloated,” and “inefficient.”

Funding and spending were a major concern, as were tuition rates. And COVID-19 was mentioned only as a negative, with the potential to cause major setbacks, not as a sign of strength.

“I absolutely think [higher education] has been a paralyzed sector for at least the last decade, and I think it’s chewed up and spit out a lot of students, and I think it’s a damn shame,” one education journalist said.

That said, a substantial minority of journalists — 41 percent — said higher education is going in the right direction. In interviews, most journalists with positive views cited progress on addressing educational equity. They praised universities and colleges for making themselves more accessible to people of color, students from low-income families, and others who had traditionally been underserved by the sector.

One postsecondary-only journalist summed it up sanguinely like this:

“I generally think it’s going in the right direction, just because so many more people are accessing higher education from different income levels and different ethnic groups than in the past. It’s growing pains and changes while people focus on things like, ‘Oh, free speech or sexual harassment.’ ... Those issues affect a tiny proportion of actual people and life on campuses. So much else is going on [for] hundreds and hundreds of thousands of students getting educated and getting on with their lives.”

In the words of an education journalist:

“I absolutely think [higher education] has been a paralyzed sector for at least the last decade, and I think it’s chewed up and spit out a lot of students, and I think it’s a damn shame.”

■ PART 4: Who Are the Education Journalists?

According to survey results, the typical education journalist is a 38-year-old white, heterosexual female with eight years of experience on the beat. She is more likely to be a reporter (70 percent) than an editor (27 percent). There's roughly a 50/50 chance that she is a newspaper journalist and also that at least some of her work appears online. Her work most likely appears in a general-interest outlet. There's just a 1 in 4 chance that she works at an education-focused news organization.

The typical education journalist spends almost all of her time — 91 percent — on education as opposed to other subjects. This most likely means both elementary/secondary and higher education: 63 percent of survey respondents covered both levels. Odds are that her work is geographically focused on the state or local level (53 percent). She is twice as likely to live in the Southern United States (40 percent) as in any other region of the country. She likely has a full-time job with benefits from her employer (79 percent) and if she does, her salary is about \$65,000 a year. She probably did not grow up in poverty: There's less than a 1 in 5 chance that she qualified for free or reduced-price meals as a child. Odds are she has no children of her own. If she is a parent, her children are most likely to attend or have attended public schools.

What else do we know about the journalists who bring us critical information about our public and private universities and schools? The sections that follow take a deeper dive.

Women on the Education Beat

When EWA conducted its first State of the Education Beat survey in 2015, 71 percent of respondents were female, a ratio that was consistent across older and younger cohorts of education journalists.

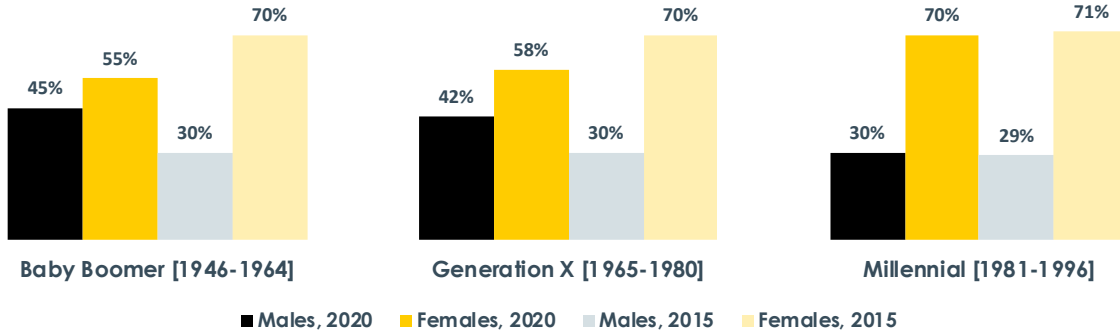
In the new survey, the overall share of women in the field is somewhat smaller (65 percent), but that isn't the real change. What is different is that females are now much more heavily represented among younger than older generations of education journalists. In the new survey, 70 percent of Millennials are female as compared to 58 percent of Generation X education journalists and 55 percent of their Baby Boomer peers. Similarly, 76 percent of survey respondents with less than five years of experience in education journalism are female as compared to 58 percent of those who have spent more than a decade in the field.

Although it is difficult to find [data from a study more recent than 2014](#), women have consistently comprised around 60 percent of students enrolled in undergraduate journalism and mass communications programs dating back to the late 1980s and likely even before that time. So while it's possible that there has been a sudden uptick in the share of female journalism school



— Allison Pohle, The Wall Street Journal (Allison Pohle)

Education journalists by gender and generation, 2015 vs. 2020



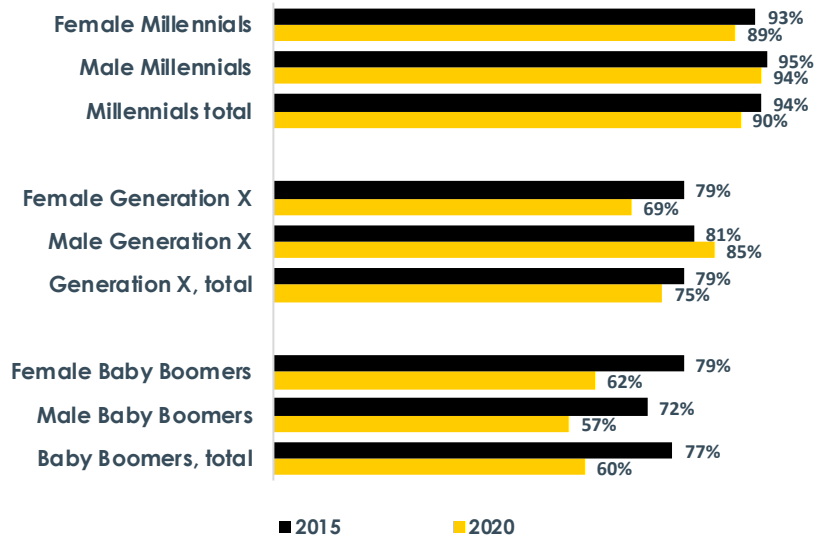
graduates since 2014, it seems unlikely, especially since the percentage of younger education journalists who are female has held steady since 2015.

What has really changed is that there now appear to be fewer older women working as education journalists. Certainly, this has been a [longstanding trend in the news business](#): Despite the fact that journalism schools have long been majority female, newsrooms have remained disproportionately male. In the profession as a whole, the older and more experienced journalists become, the less likely they are to be female.

When women do stay in education journalism, it is increasingly on a part-time or freelance basis — especially for Generation X journalists. In 2015, roughly 80 percent of male and female Generation X education journalists worked full-time and received benefits. In the new survey, 85 percent of male Generation Xers are full-timers with benefits, compared to just 69 percent of females.

By contrast, in both 2015 and 2020, nearly all Millennial education journalists were full-time employees with benefits. Nor is there a full-time/part-time gender gap to speak of among Baby

Percent of education journalists who are full-time employees with benefits, by generation and gender



Boomers, although males and females alike were less likely to work full-time in 2020 than in 2015 (60 percent versus 77 percent). This is likely because Boomers now range in age from 56 to 74 in a country where the average retirement age is 66. The oldest Generation X journalists are 55, so retirement, while possible, is less likely.

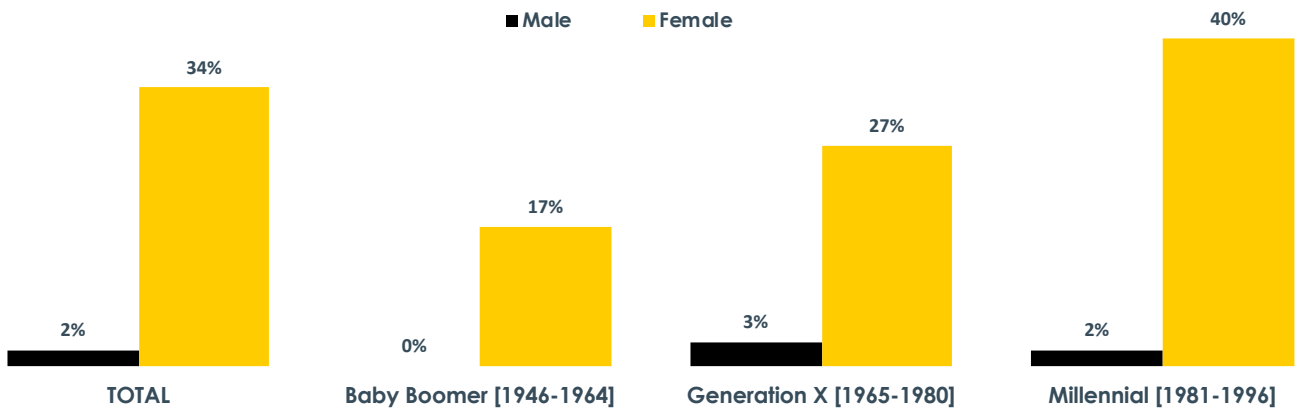
Gender Discrimination

Gender discrimination is the bias that education journalists said they face most often on the job. Twenty-three percent of survey respondents (34 percent of females and 2 percent of males) said they have encountered gender discrimination by people outside their workplace who interacted with them while they were working as education journalists.

Younger women were significantly more likely than their older peers to say they’ve faced gender discrimination: Forty percent of Millennial women said they’ve encountered this kind of bias on the job at some point during their careers in education journalism, compared to 27 percent of Generation X-ers and 17 percent of Baby Boomers. Although this could mean that younger journalists have experienced a higher rate of gender bias, the gap could also be due to generational differences in perceptions of what does or does not rise to the level of discrimination.

Gender discrimination is the bias that education journalists said they face most often on the job.

Percent of education journalists, by gender and generation, who say they have faced gender discrimination from people outside their workplaces who interacted with them during their work as an education journalist

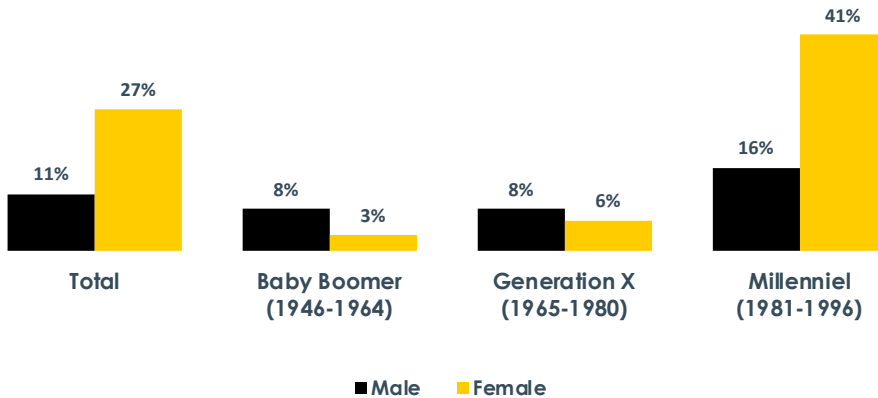


Age-based Bias

Age-based bias is not actually considered discrimination until its target reaches 40 years old. And the typical education journalist is 38. Yet next to gender, age is the bias survey respondents were most likely to say they've encountered on the job from people outside their workplace. And Millennials — the oldest of whom are just now turning 40 — were significantly more likely than their older peers to report that they have faced this kind of bias. Thirty-five percent of Millennials said they have been discriminated against on the basis of age, compared to 7 percent of Generation X-ers and 8 percent of Baby Boomers. The perception is particularly prevalent among female Millennials, 41 percent of whom reported experiencing age bias on the job, compared to 16 percent of males in that age group. Among older age groups, men were actually more likely to report age discrimination.

Thirty-five percent of Millennials said they have been discriminated against on the basis of age, compared to 7 percent of Generation X-ers and 8 percent of Baby Boomers.

Percent of survey respondents, by gender and generation, who say they have faced age discrimination from people outside their workplaces who interacted with them during their work as an education journalist



During interviews, it became clear that there is likely a connection between youth, gender, and perceptions of age-related bias.

“I’m a young woman and I think that sometimes colors the way that people interact with me,” one Millennial education reporter said. “Sometimes I’ll be spoken over or I think people will sometimes assume that I don’t know about whatever topic I’m asking about because I both sound and look very young.”

Other Millennial female education journalists said they had been mistaken for or treated like interns or students, quizzed about whether they planned to continue working after their upcoming nuptials, and were presumed to be too young to cover hard news.

Interviewees tended to downplay what they had encountered.

“I don’t know that I would call it discrimination but ... just the lack of respect — or being treated as a child basically in a professional setting,” one female Millennial journalist said. “[I was] just treated badly or disrespected for being a young woman.”

No male Millennial reported similar experiences during interviews, although 16 percent of male Millennial survey respondents said they had faced age discrimination.

The Gender Age-Wage Gap

Among survey respondents with full-time jobs with benefits, males earned, on average, an annual salary of \$67,680. That figure is \$4,721 more than the \$62,959 that the average female earned per year.

However, this overall gap masks substantial differences between older and younger education journalists.

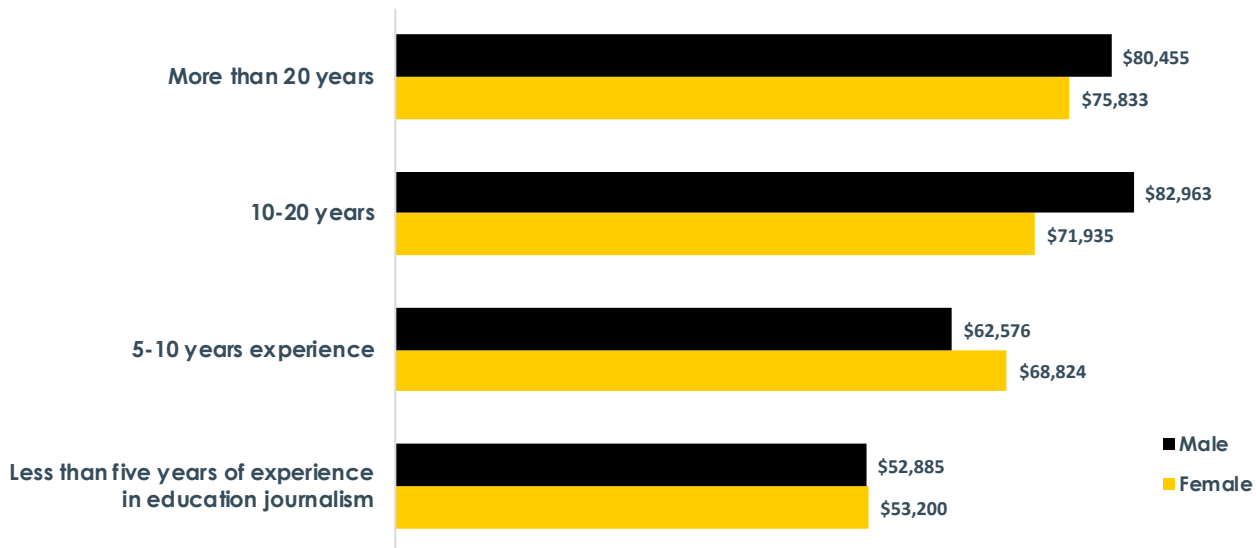
Although younger and less-experienced female education journalists were most likely to report age-based discrimination, their more experienced female peers were more likely to encounter wage gaps by gender.

Among survey respondents with full-time jobs with benefits, women with less than 10 years of experience actually earned more, on average, than their male peers with the same amount of time in education journalism.

In the words of a female Millennial journalist:

“I don’t know that I would call it discrimination but ... just the lack of respect — or being treated as a child basically in a professional setting.”

Average annual salaries of full-time employees with benefits, by gender and years in education journalism



However, around year 10 in the field, that trend reverses.

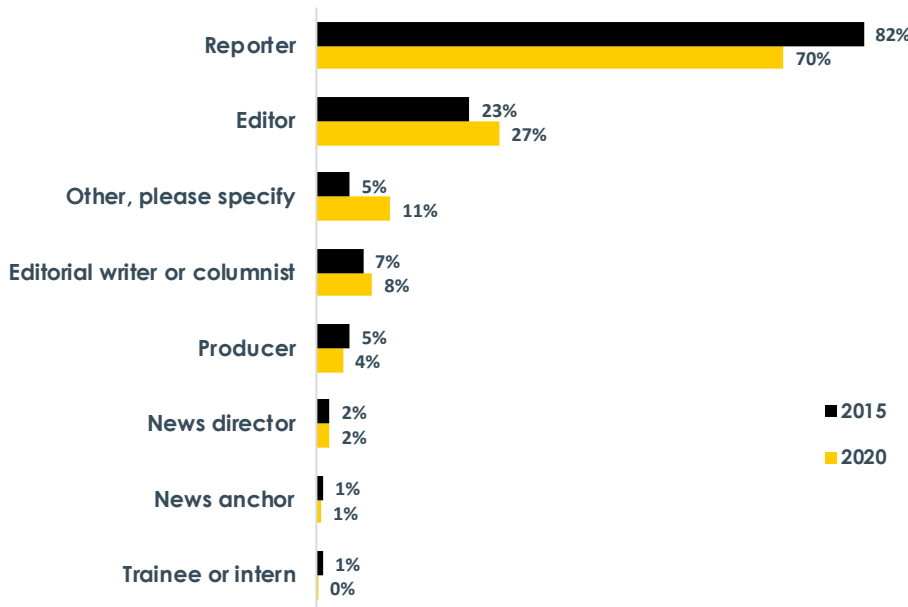
Women with 10 to 20 years of experience in education journalism earned \$11,028 less annually than men with the same amount of time in the field. Among veterans with 20-plus years under their belts, that gap remains, but shrinks to \$4,622 more per year for males.

The field of journalism as a whole suffers from a shortage of women in leadership positions, which are typically higher-paying than reporting positions. This trend appears to be playing out in education journalism as well. Education journalists with 10 or more years in the field are ripe to step into leadership positions. Yet 85 percent of women with 10 to 20 years of experience in education journalism remained reporters, compared to just 54 percent of men. Thirty-four percent of male survey respondents who worked full-time identified themselves as editors, producers, or news directors, as compared to 27 percent of females. On average, survey respondents who worked (full-time) in these leadership positions earned \$18,000 more annually than those who did not.

Overall, the share of survey respondents who spent at least some time reporting declined between 2015 and 2020, from 82 percent to 70 percent. This may be related to the fact that there are now fewer older women in journalism who would otherwise have spent their careers in reporting. However, it may also relate to an uptick in journalists who placed themselves in the “other” category, which includes newer types of positions such as social media strategist and audience engagement specialist.

The field of journalism as a whole suffers from a shortage of women in leadership positions, which are typically higher-paying than reporting positions.

Which of the following categories describe your current position? Please select all that apply.

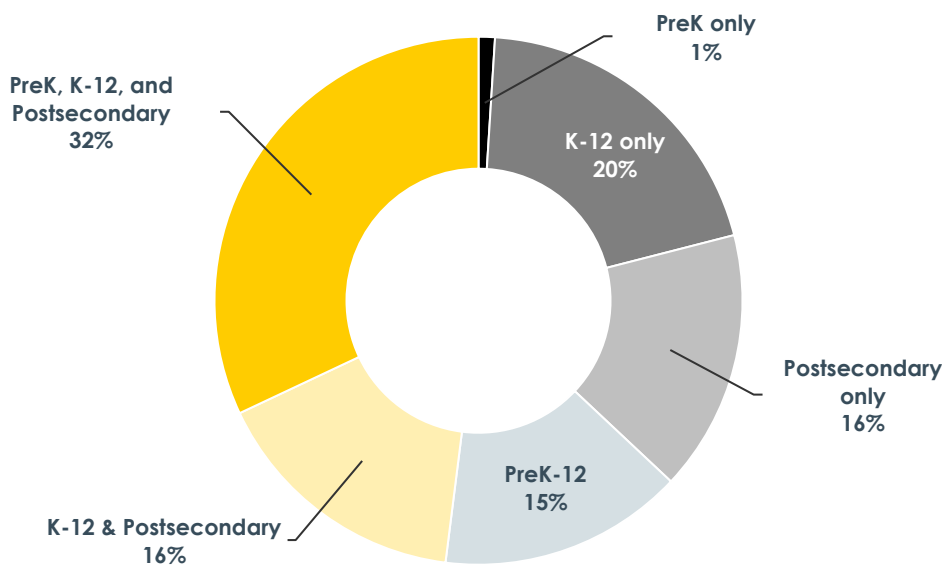


A final difference that may help explain the gender wage gap has to do with the share of men who focused their news coverage on postsecondary education. Just as tenured university professors earn more than K-12 teachers with tenure, education journalists who focused exclusively on higher education earned more than those who did not. The gap is substantial — \$11,512 per year.

Overall, 16 percent of education journalists focused exclusively on postsecondary education, roughly the same share that focused on that beat in 2015.

Overall, 16 percent of education journalists focused exclusively on postsecondary education, roughly the same share that focused on that beat in 2015.

Which level or levels of education are you responsible for covering or overseeing? Please select all that apply.



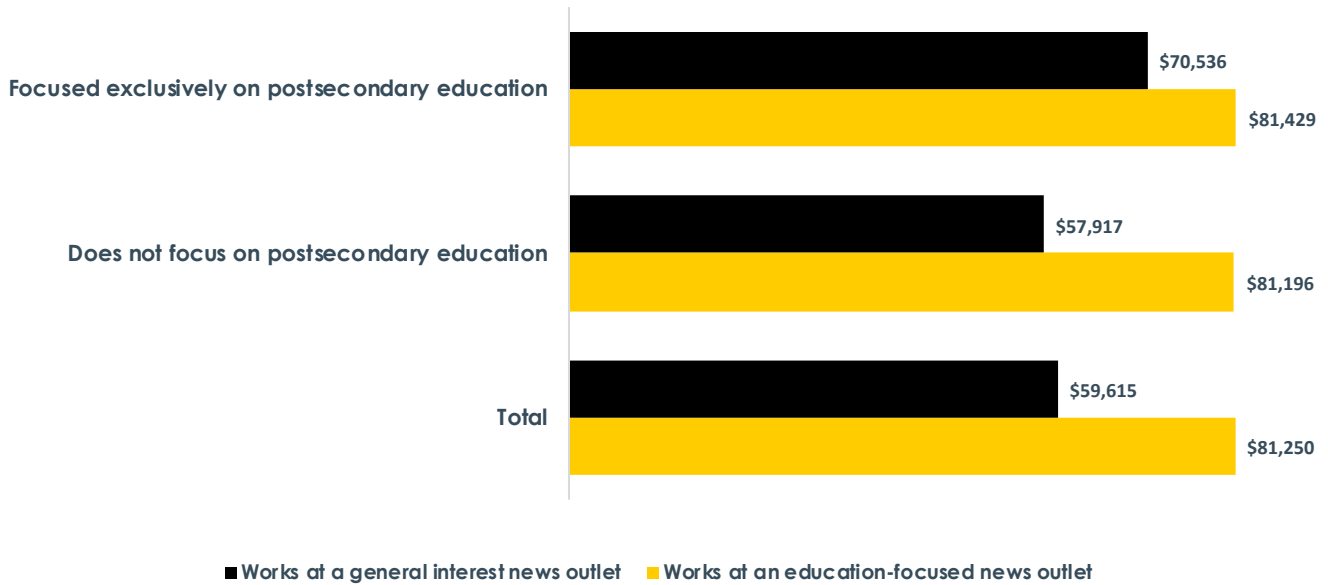
Of that 16 percent, men are more than twice as likely to cover that beat: 24 percent of male education journalists focused exclusively on postsecondary education, compared to 11 percent of females. These numbers are virtually unchanged since the first State of the Education Beat survey in 2015.

The Postsecondary Premium

The postsecondary premium may be related to gender, but it appears to extend beyond that category.

Men who focused exclusively on higher education earned more than male education journalists who did not. And the same was true for females.

Average annual salaries for full-time employees of education-focused and general interest outlets, for those who do and do not focus on postsecondary education

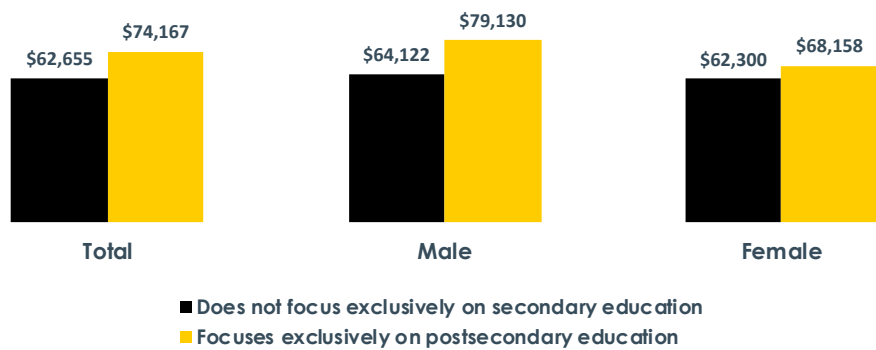


Compared to their peers who did not focus exclusively on that sector, postsecondary-focused journalists also differed from their peers in that they were nearly twice as likely to work for education-focused news outlets. And education-focused outlets pay education journalists more than general-interest outlets (\$81,250 annually versus \$59,915 for survey respondents who work full-time).

However, pay differentials between education-focused and general-interest outlets can't fully explain the postsecondary premium either.

Among employees of outlets devoted to education coverage, journalists who focused exclusively

Average annual salaries of full-time male and female employees who do and do not focus exclusively on postsecondary education



on higher education earned slightly more than those who did not. There's also a postsecondary premium for journalists at general-interest outlets, and it's even bigger. At general-interest outlets, journalists who focused exclusively on postsecondary education earned an average of \$12,619 per year more than their colleagues whose beats included areas of education other than higher education.

On average, employees of education-focused news outlets had three years more experience than their peers at general-interest news organizations, which could help explain that pay gap. However, journalists who focused on postsecondary education did not: in fact, quite the opposite. Survey respondents who focused exclusively on postsecondary education had one year less of experience in education journalism than their peers with other beats.

In the end, the postsecondary premium appears to be a phenomenon that can't be explained away by differences in gender, experience level, or outlet type.

Fifty-five percent of American adults between the ages of 18 and 40 have children, compared to 20 percent of education journalists age 40 and younger.



—Jacqueline Rabe, The CT Mirror (Jacqueline Rabe)

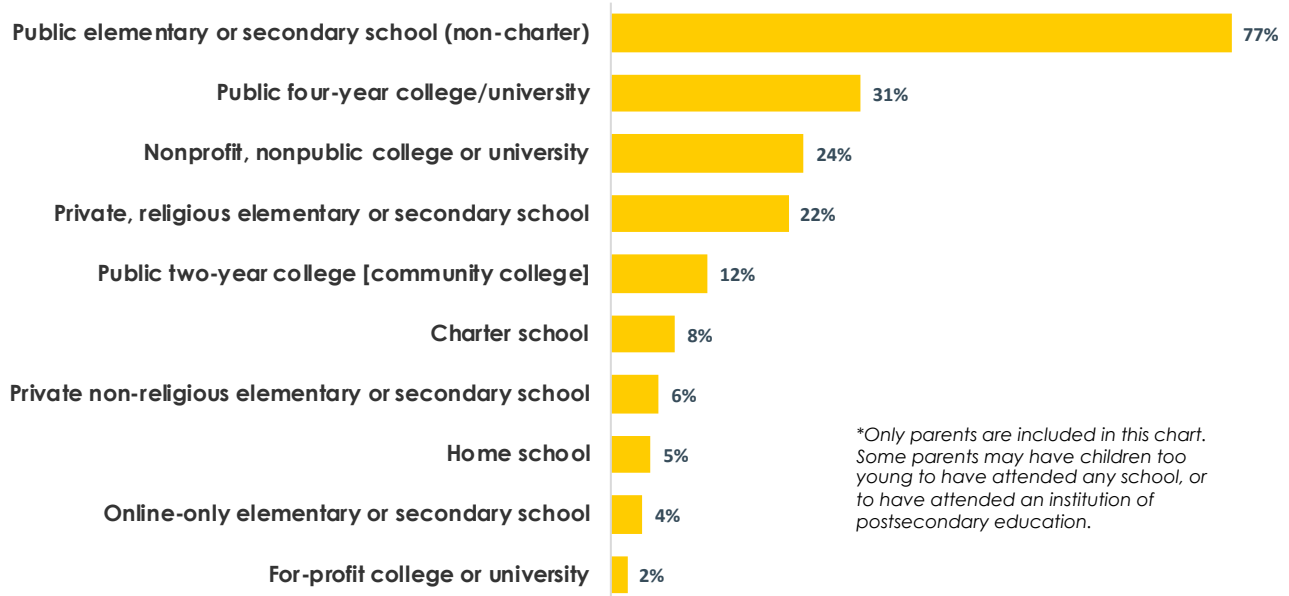
The Parent Gap

Although the typical education journalist may spend a great deal of time around institutions that serve children, fewer than half (46 percent) have children.

Fifty-five percent of American adults between the ages of 18 and 40 have children, compared to 20 percent of education journalists age 40 and younger.

This trend most likely reflects the reality that education journalists are nearly all college graduates, a population that is more likely to delay parenthood. It is also possible that young

My child/children has/have attended or currently attend(s) the following types of schools. Please select all that apply.*



parents leave the field of education journalism, returning later once their children are older.

Among older journalists, the share of parents more closely reflects the demographics of the population as a whole. Eighty-six percent of adults ages 45 or older have children, according to [Gallup](#), compared to 81 percent of education journalists in that age group.

Overall, 8 percent of female education journalists who are parents reported that they have been discriminated against on the basis of pregnancy or maternity by people outside their workplace who interacted with them on the job.

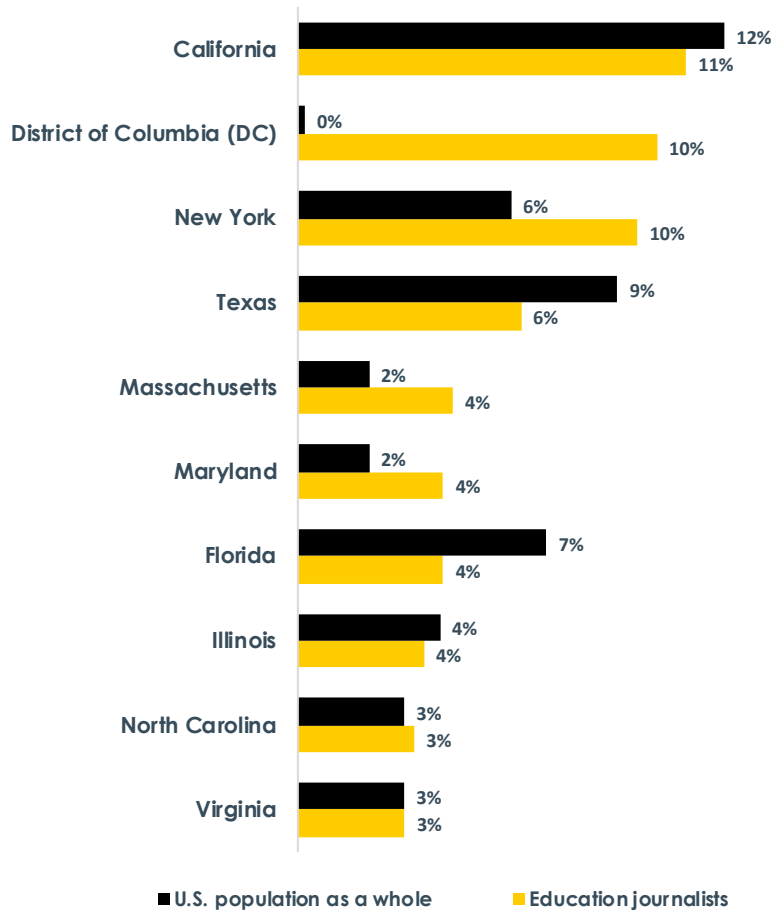
If education journalists are parents, chances are good (77 percent) that they have sent at least one child to a public K-12 school. However, odds are also roughly 1 in 5 that one of their children has attended a private religious school. Nationwide, 10 percent of K-12 students attend private schools at any one point in time.

Meanwhile, the survey indicates that public, four-year colleges and universities are the type of postsecondary institutions that education journalists’ children are most likely to attend.

The Geographic Gap

Like the American population as a whole, education journalists are most likely to live in the Southern United States. However, compared to the population as a whole, education journalists are

Where education journalists and U.S. residents live*



Compared to the population as a whole, education journalists are disproportionately concentrated in the District of Columbia and its suburbs, and also in New York.

*SOURCE: State of the Education Beat study, U.S. Census Bureau

disproportionately concentrated in the District of Columbia and its suburbs, and also in New York. For national journalists, this means coverage runs the risk of tilting toward issues and perspectives common to the East Coast while giving short shrift to other areas of the country. For example, the behemoth New York City education system is the nation’s largest and, as a result, attracts a great deal of news media attention. Yet its size alone (1.1 million students) makes it an anomaly among U.S. school districts — [more than three-quarters of which enroll less than 5,000 students](#).

■ PART 5: Perceptions of the Profession



— Patrick Wall, Chalkbeat (Stacey Ragin)

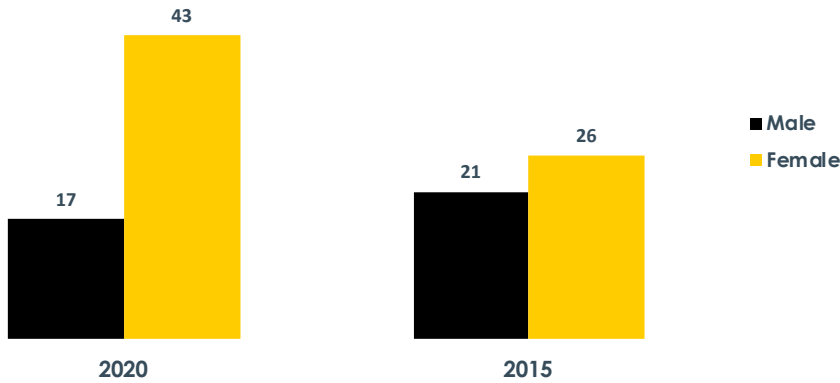
Despite stiff economic headwinds, routine demonization of the press, and the havoc wreaked by a worldwide pandemic, education journalists are more confident than ever in their profession.

The second installment of the Education Journalism Confidence Index finds that 84 percent of education journalists had favorable views of the profession in 2020, up from 77 percent five years earlier. The overall score on the index, developed in 2016 to assess perceptions of the profession, has increased by nine points to 34 on a 200-point scale that ranges from -100 to +100.

Now, as in 2015, the overall results hide significant differences related to gender and age. In 2020, women’s confidence ratings were more than twice as high as those of their male counterparts. In fact, women’s ratings have nearly doubled since 2015 as compared to an increase of four points for male education journalists.

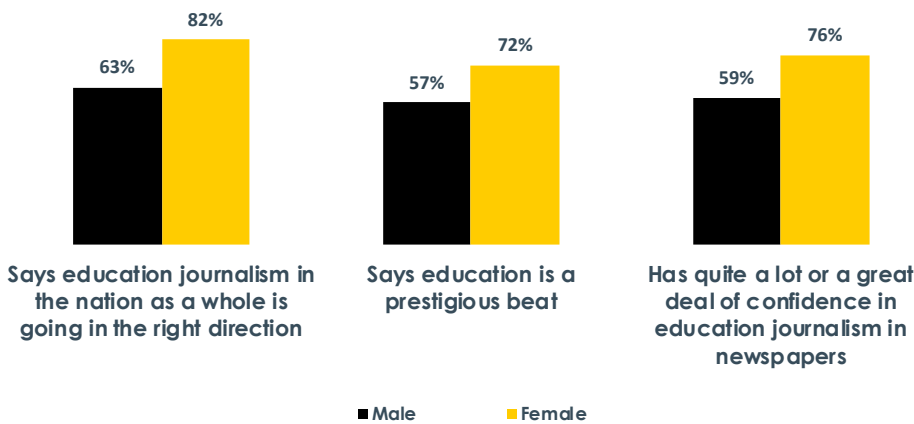
Differences on three variables that comprise the index help explain the gender gap. Two are

Education Journalism Confidence Index results by gender, 2015 vs. 2020



broad barometers of perceptions: Despite evidence that they are more likely to face challenges like wage gaps and on-the-job discrimination, women were much more likely than men to say that education journalism in the nation as a whole is going in the right direction and that education is a prestigious beat. When it comes to newspapers in particular, females were also more likely to express confidence in education journalism produced by this outlet type. It’s unclear why this gender difference is so pronounced.

Gender differences in perceptions of the profession



The Education Journalism Confidence Index was developed by EWA and the EdWeek Research Center in 2016. It is based on 11 survey questions that assess:

- Levels of confidence in education journalism produced by newspapers, online-only outlets, magazines, radio, and television
- Whether or not respondents perceive that education journalism is going in the right or wrong direction in their own news outlets and in the nation as a whole
- Whether now is a good time to start a job in education journalism, compared to other types of journalism
- Level of commitment to education journalism as a career path
- Perceived level of prestige of the beat
- Whether education journalists believe their work makes a positive impact on the community

The Index is scored on a 200-point scale ranging from -100 to +100. Scores of +1 to +100 are considered positive or favorable. Scores of -1 to -100 are considered negative or unfavorable. Scores of 0 are considered neutral.

² Due to the desire to ask new questions while keeping the survey a manageable length, the 2020 survey did not include two questions used to create the 2016 Education Journalism Confidence Index. The questions that were eliminated were:

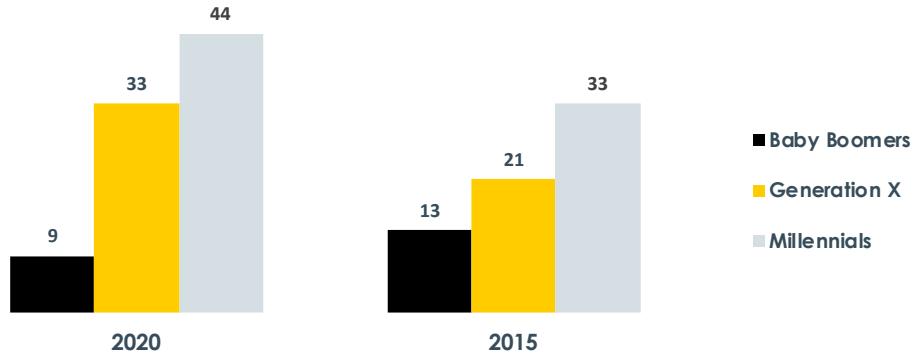
1. Thinking about the level of influence of education journalism in the U.S. today, is it: increasing [30 percent]; decreasing [18 percent]; about the same/don’t know [52 percent]. 2. All things considered, how satisfied are you with your present job? Very/fairly satisfied [79 percent]; Very/somewhat dissatisfied [20 percent]

As a result, these questions were not included in the 2020 Index.

All other questions remained the same between 2015 and 2020. Overall, the 2015 Index was based on 13 questions while the 2020 Index was based on 11 questions. Comparisons found in this report contrast the 2020 results with the 2015 results based only on those 11 questions.

Age also plays a role. In 2020, as in 2015, Millennials were significantly more positive than their elders. And Baby Boomers were most pessimistic about the profession.

**Education Journalism Confidence Index
results by generation**

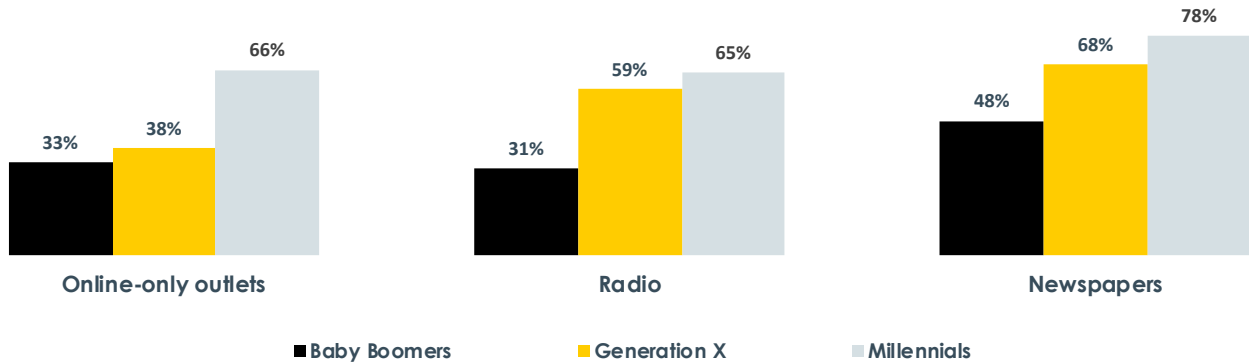


Compared to their younger peers, Baby Boomers were also much less likely to express high levels of confidence in the education journalism produced by two legacy media types — newspapers and radio.

One reason for this generation gap may be that older journalists have lived through a more prosperous era for the media in which many more local news outlets were extensively covering education as a bread-and-butter beat. This may help explain why Baby Boomers were much less likely than Millennials to say that now is a good time to start a job in education journalism, compared to other beats (62 percent versus 90 percent). Generation X-ers were in between, at 78 percent. Compared to their younger peers, Baby Boomers were also much less likely to express high levels of confidence in the education journalism produced by two legacy media types — newspapers and radio. This may be related to older journalists’ recollection of an era in which both outlet types were better-funded and more numerous, especially at the local level. Perhaps the current era pales in comparison for these veteran journalists.

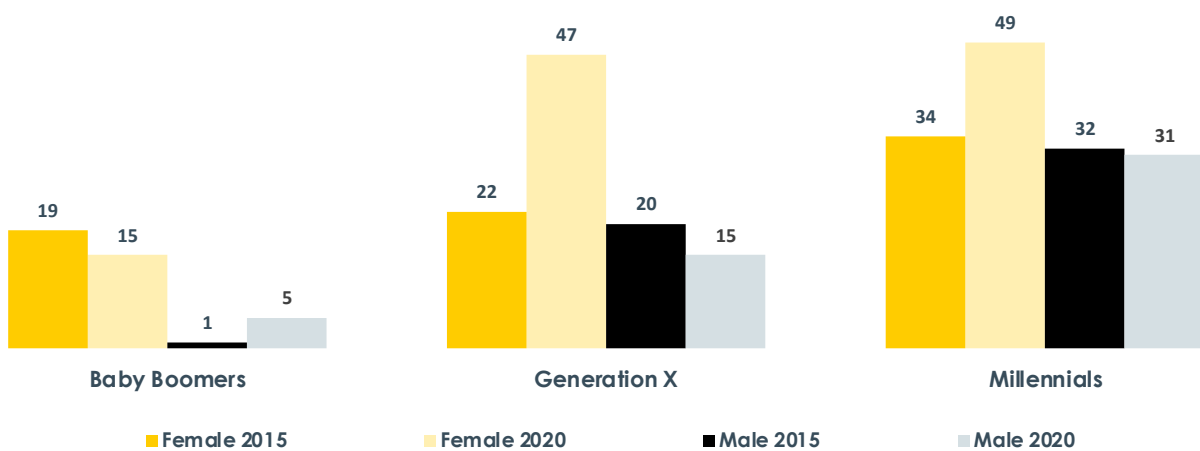
When it comes to online-only outlets, both Baby Boomers and Generation Xers were much less likely to express confidence than Millennials, a result that might be explained by younger generations’ higher levels of experience and comfort with the internet.

Percent of older and younger study participants with a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in education journalism associated with online-only outlets, radio and newspapers



With regard to perceptions of the profession, gender and age differences interact with one another. Gender differences were starkest among Millennial and Generation X respondents. For younger journalists, the gender differences have also become more pronounced since 2015. Among Generation X journalists in particular, females in 2020 assigned ratings that were more than three times higher than ratings from males in the same age group. It is not clear why this was the case.

Education Journalism Confidence Index results by gender and generation, 2015 vs. 2020



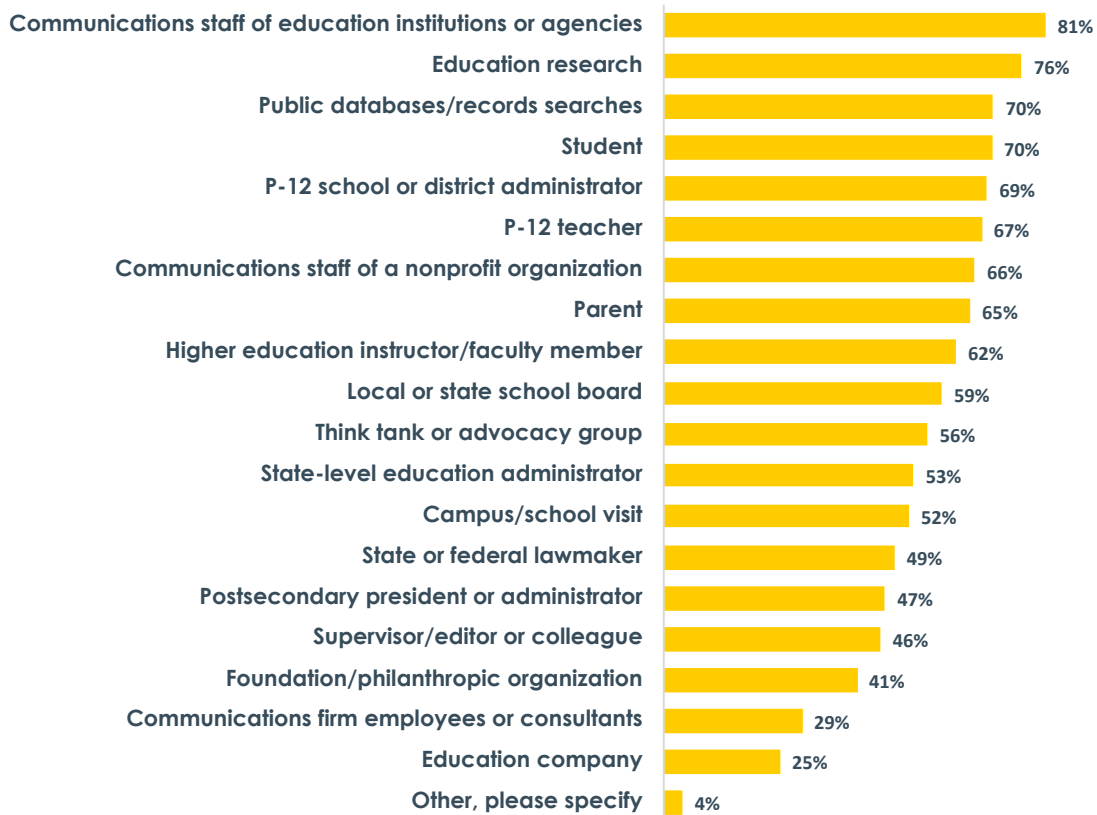
■ PART 6: Sourcing and Coverage

The PR Paradox

In 2020, as in 2015, public relations was a major source of information for education journalists. Eighty-one percent said they had turned to the communications staff of education institutions or agencies (schools, districts, colleges, education departments, etc.) more than once in the past month. No other source was consulted more often.

In addition, nearly two out of three survey respondents said they had consulted the communications staff of a nonprofit organization. And close to 1 in 3 had turned to communications firm employees or consultants. All told, 89 percent of education journalists said they had consulted some type of public relations source more than once in the past month.

Which of the following sources have you or the education journalists you supervise turned to more than once in the past month while reporting an education story? Please select all that apply.



Only education companies and the U.S. Department of Education received lower confidence ratings.

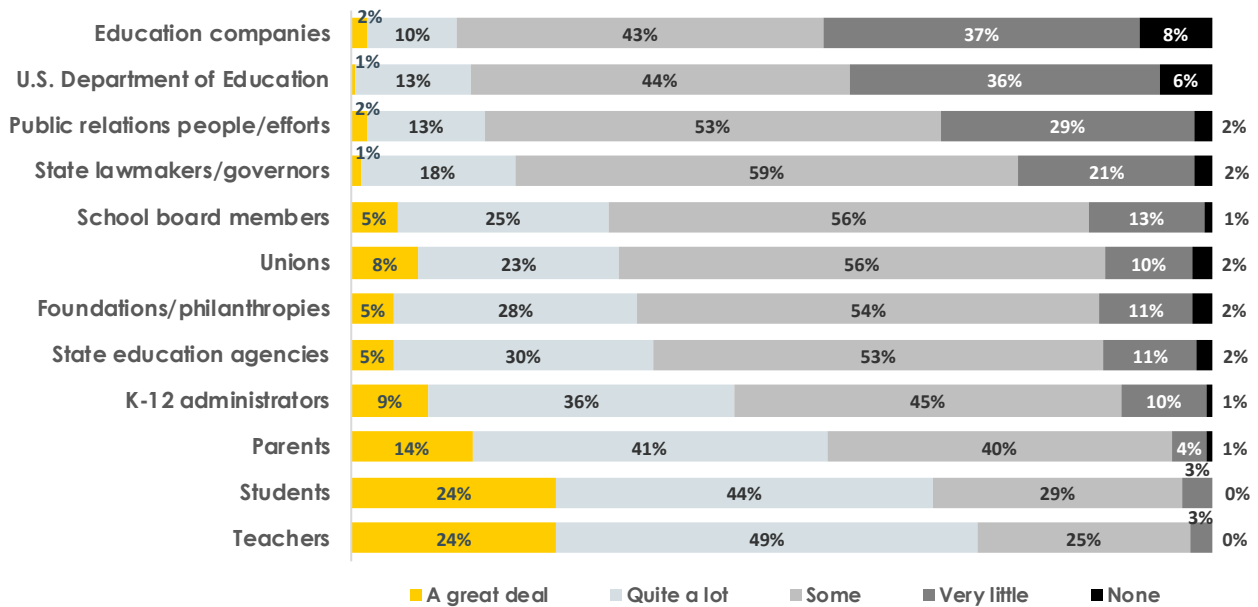
High Reliance, Low Confidence

Despite their heavy reliance on public relations people, education journalists do not necessarily trust them. Just 15 percent said they have quite a lot or a great deal of confidence that public relations people will provide timely and accurate information about K-12 education. Nearly 1 in 3 said they have very little or no confidence. (Results were similar when journalists were asked the same questions about postsecondary education). Only education companies and the U.S. Department of Education received lower confidence ratings. While the study did not ask journalists how often they consulted the Education Department, it did find that only a quarter of respondents had reached out to education companies two or more times in the past two months.

Levels of confidence in public relations professionals and efforts were identical among journalists who had and had not consulted them multiple times in the past month. In other words, education journalists appear to be turning to this source regardless of whether or not they had confidence in the timeliness or accuracy of the information PR professionals provide.

Although the vast majority of education journalists in all age groups had turned to PR sources at least twice in the past month, 79 percent of Baby Boomers said they have consulted this source,

How much confidence do you have that the following institutions or individuals will provide timely and accurate information about K-12 education?*



*Totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding

compared to 86 percent of Generation X-ers and 95 percent of Millennials.

“I don’t know how to say this without sounding snobby, [but] ... I think maybe people are getting lazy in this era when reporters barely leave their computers ever,” one veteran education journalist said. “In the old days, [we would] get up and be on campuses and talking to people and making phone calls. It was more of a pursuit of knowledge and information rather than you were a passive receiver of it.”

Despite these relatively small age and experience-related differences, the reality is that reliance on public relations efforts is pervasive not only in education journalism but in the profession as a whole. In interviews, there was widespread agreement that public relations sources like press releases were quick, convenient, and abundant — all qualities that appeal to journalists facing story quotas, a 24/7 social media-driven news cycle, and a business where resources are shrinking while demands grow. Journalists turned to PR people to quickly connect them to experts, leaders, and other sources on deadline. And, they said, it helps.

“If we look at our industry realistically, when I do my graduation tab every year, I have nearly 100 school districts and it’s just me doing it,” an education reporter at a local newspaper said. “So I don’t have the time, energy, or resources to accurately or regularly cover the vast majority of all those [school systems].”

Outnumbered by PR Professionals

With [six public relations people for every journalist](#), members of the news media can sometimes feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of pitches, with several lamenting the fact that sifting through the press releases took time away from other arguably more productive pursuits.

“It seems like if you’re in [my city], the number of journalists has been cut by two-thirds, but the number of PR professionals has grown by that same amount,” a local education reporter said. “And so I think we’re just outnumbered.”

When journalists report on information in news releases, it’s sometimes because they fear being beaten by the competition — which has almost always received the same information. Several interviewees worried that this could make education news seem repetitive, and that it permitted institutions with their own axe to grind to set the agenda.

“We skip stories that we ought to tell,” one education journalist said. “Every time we write a story that’s triggered by a PR person, that’s a story we didn’t write about something we’ve found out on our own.”

Journalists also expressed concern that covering news releases could bias news in favor of organizations and officials with the resources to fund PR efforts. One reporter also questioned whether the school district PR people he had encountered were capable of representing a diverse school district he covered.

“If I’m talking to a white PR person who’s never made less than \$75,000 a year, it’s very likely they don’t understand the reality of life for kids in my largest school district, which is 81 percent

Journalists turned to PR people to quickly connect them to experts, leaders, and other sources on deadline. And, they said, it helps.

minority and 70 percent economically disadvantaged,” he said. “So if we get reliant on them, we’re not listening to the children well, we’re not listening to the families, we’re not listening to the communities, and they’re not going to tell us the negative things.”

Some journalists said they had no choice but to reach out to PR people because the institutions they covered — public and private alike — refused to communicate in any other way.

“Often the only information you get from a school district is going to be press releases,” one education journalist said. “Sometimes it’s hard to even find the person who should be giving information because there’s such a high turnover rate.”

As a result, interviewees said the public could end up with a sanitized and misleading picture, where the one student a reporter gets to interview is the valedictorian handpicked by the PR person and not the student who struggles.

“I think that’s where we see a really big negative impact to the community, is when the PR people want to tell their pretty stories, but they don’t want to help us get the word out when there’s a story that’s negatively impacting their students,” said one newspaper reporter.

In any case, public relations people are a fixture of the media landscape. In response to an open-ended survey question, education journalists offered advice to help improve their sometimes-fraught relationship with the news media. Their No. 1 request? Read, watch, or listen to news coverage by the outlets they see as a target audience.

“They have a tough job,” one education journalist said. “But if you understand what kinds of stories I cover, then I am receptive. The least successful pitches are, ‘Oh, I have a company doing what you just wrote about.’ Tell me something I haven’t written about yet.”

In the words of one education journalist:

“Sometimes it’s hard to even find the person who should be giving information because there’s such a high turnover rate.”

What advice would you give to a public relations person trying to successfully pitch stories and otherwise productively interact with education journalists?



■ Conclusion and Recommendations



— Sasha Aslamian, APM Reports

The worldwide coronavirus pandemic has underscored that education is an essential service in our society, and that journalism is an essential means of ensuring the public has timely and accurate information about that service.

The State of the Education Beat study results suggest that the journalists who collect and disseminate news and information about education are committed professionals who strongly believe in the power of their work to positively and profoundly shape policies and practices. By and large, these journalists are optimistic about their profession and confident in the work of their peers.

Yet challenges abound.

At the top of the list is the racial mismatch between education journalists, who are

overwhelmingly white, and the students they cover, who are much more racially and ethnically diverse. Most study participants saw this as a serious problem that can only be remedied by diversifying the workforce, a solution that will not happen overnight. In the meantime, education journalists feared that they are under-covering issues of equity and missing out on key stories and perspectives that are critical to their diverse communities.

They are doing so under conditions that are less than ideal. Politicians call them enemies of the people. Audiences harass them in person and online. Administrators ban them from campus and refuse to return their calls. All of this is occurring in an economic environment in which an already decimated news business is reeling from pandemic-induced revenue losses.

In conclusion, in order to address these and other challenges faced by the profession, EWA proposes five recommendations based on the findings of this report:



— José Martínez, WFMY-TV 69News (David Grimm)

- ✓ Given that in-depth **EDUCATION JOURNALISM** drives civic engagement and positively impacts communities, newsroom leaders should hold coverage of this essential topic in high regard and allocate resources accordingly.
- ✓ **NEWSROOM LEADERS** should improve the recruitment, hiring, and retention of nonwhite journalists and examine how demographic factors of their workforce other than race impact coverage.
- ✓ **NEWS ORGANIZATIONS** should direct more resources to covering issues of equity, poverty, and inequality, which education journalists see as the most important on the beat over the next two years.
- ✓ **SCHOOLS, COLLEGES, AND UNIVERSITIES** — especially those that receive public funding — must remove barriers to journalists’ timely access to campuses, staff, and information.
- ✓ **PHILANTHROPIES** should step up efforts to fill gaps left by news industry contraction and should give grantees’ greater latitude in what areas of education to cover.

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