Speakers:

- **Ruth Serven Smith**, education editor, The Alabama Education Lab at AL.com
- **Eric Stirgus**, education editor, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Editor's note: *The overall transcript has been lightly edited.*

Eric Stirgus: Hi, everybody. I'm Eric Stirgus. I'm the education editor at The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. I've been in that role now for a little over a year. Before that, I was covering higher ed for the AJC and then before that, covering local schools in the Atlanta area.

Ruth Serven Smith: I'm Ruth Serven Smith. I started and run the education lab at AL.com, which is a statewide team that covers all school districts around the state. From the perspective of helping every kid in Alabama get the best education [00:00:30] possible. Um, before that, I was a reporter for a local newsrooms in Virginia, and I also am a former higher ed reporter.

So I've done both the higher ed and the K-12 side of things. We're going to keep it pretty casual today and just run through 10 of what we think are the most interesting education topics out there right now. We'll leave some time for questions. Eric and [00:01:00] I are also both editors at newsrooms that are hiring, so it's a great time to get our business cards and introduce yourself if you're looking. Um, and yeah. Do you want to start?

Eric Stirgus: Sure. Yeah. So I guess the first thing I was going to talk about is obviously a hot topic nationally is DEI in the classroom. I'm sure many of your states are dealing with those sorts of issues right now, particularly if you're in Florida.

Um, you know, I think some [00:01:30] of you all are probably familiar with how Governor DeSantis there has impacted. In May, he passed a law banning the use of state and federal funds for DEI programs. So that's created a hot mess down there. And a lot of good stories from reporters, obviously, in our state in Georgia. You know, there have been a few issues regarding that as well. First, there's been the state's Professional Standards Commission has removed [00:02:00] references to diversity from its teacher prep programs. And so we've been following that over the last few months. I don't know if any of your states have been dealing with that, but if not, you know, that might be a good thing to sort of keep an eye out. You know, they said that they got their guidance from the university system of Georgia, which they told them that they felt that those types of words were ambiguous and unclear and that was their rationale for making those changes. It's been kind of interesting at those hearings [00:02:30] where the the commission has held those meetings remotely while people have come to the meeting to speak in person. And, you know, there has been little accountability on that front. They just said, well, you know, we're just you know, you know, the law says we can be remote.

Eric Stirgus: So there's really been no, you know, opportunities for some of the people who are concerned about this to voice their concerns to them directly, which is kind of interesting. But it's

been a doozy for us as well. And [00:03:00] then also in Georgia, we've had a situation recently where the lieutenant governor, he's relatively new. He's been in office for a little over a year now. He has also been on the attack against diversity, equity and inclusion programs and and asked the university system of Georgia to provide information about its programs. And the system wound up giving them a lengthy response about a month ago now and said that there were a number of DEI programs, some that were federally required, some that the [00:03:30] state felt it was necessary, and they were spending several million dollars on these efforts.

So right now, the Kentucky government is still playing nice with the university system. You know, I think going through the numbers, but I suspect that will probably get nasty again. And I think, you know, we'll see some pushback on that front. But but, you know, in your state, it'd probably be good to sort of keep an eye out for that sort of stuff as well, just to sort of see, you know, if you have state leaders who are sort of, you know, trying to figure out what's going on with DEI programs [00:04:00] on the higher ed or the K through 12 level.

Ruth Serven Smith: Yeah. When you are reporting those stories, I mean, it seems like you've been following the breaking news of it like beat by beat. But how do you – I'm just curious – what is the response been from teachers who are thinking about changing standards either in their classroom or for teacher prep programs?

Eric Stirgus: Yeah, we've heard from many of them who are not happy about it. And, you know, one of the great things that our newsroom we do is we have [00:04:30] a online blog where people can write guest columns on pretty high fuel and hot education topics. And some of them have written their voice, their concerns about what's happening in Georgia with the DEI programs. And then also, you know, it's been you know, we've had some guest columns from people writing about what's happening in Florida. So, you know, it's been good to also help us with our reporting and sort of, you know, get us have us to help us have a better idea of what's happening nationally.

Ruth Serven Smith: And I'm also just curious, can I get a sense of the room like who who is. Like [00:05:00] print. Digital news. Broadcast. Broadcast. Broadcast. Yeah. Nice, nice. Nice. Okay. And so are you all mostly covering local or national? I cover statewide. Statewide? Nice. Okay. Yeah. Cool. So. So we're both kind of hopefully talk about things that are of interest.

Eric Stirgus: To all of you. And then I was just also going to add, like, you know, if you're looking for experts on these type of topics, I [00:05:30] know Morehouse has a Center for Race and Equity. Trying to put the exact title is the National Training Institute on Race and Equity. So they'll probably be a good resource for you on these types of topics. And then, you know, occasionally we reach out to Sean Harper, who runs the Race and Equity Center at the University of Southern California. He's originally from Georgia, and so he's kind of local to us. But, you know, he knows these issues on a national scale, too. So, you know, just feel free to reach out to those types of people when you're doing those types of stories.

Ruth Serven Smith: What's his name? [00:06:00]

Eric Stirgus: Shaun Harper.

Ruth Serven Smith: How do you all kind of help readers understand the problem? I guess what I'm asking is when we write about, like, CRT, DEI, those are all terms used for issues. Typically, the labels are created and given meaning by politicians. How do you how does your team [00:06:30] kind of think through like what words to use in those stories? Whether or not to use the terms politicians are using.

Eric Stirgus: I mean, we just you know, we use different terms. Like, you know, I, I don't think we go with what they tell us to do. Obviously, you know, you know, we generally will just use DEI or CRT. You know, we will have explainers about, you know, I think we did that about a year ago. Try to explain to readers what is CRT, because [00:07:00] a lot of people just didn't know or they were distorting what it means. And so that's, you know, so we've used that as a primer. And then, you know, we continue to insert that into our content. And I think it's been pretty useful for our readers.

Ruth Serven Smith: Nice. Cool. Should I take one now? Sure. Yeah. Okay. One thing Eric and I both wanted to talk about that I'm sure you've already covered in some extent is the change to race based admissions in college? Obviously, the breaking news happened [00:07:30] about the Supreme Court ruling against Harvard and UNC but I would encourage you all to be thinking forward now to August to start a school that hasn't changed. Who's enrolling in college this August, but it might change who's thinking about applying for college in October and it might change how schools are planning for next school year. Um, locally here in Alabama, we have the most number of HBCUs in the country too. And [00:08:00] so I've assigned a reporter to call around and see if and how they're changing recruiting practices with the understanding that some elite students may not be applying to the Ivy League schools because they think they have less of a chance of getting in now. And so HBCUs, especially some of the the bigger name schools like Morehouse and Spelman Howard, see [00:08:30] themselves as having a great opportunity to recruit those really high powered students as well. Um, Alabama, on the other hand, has a lot of HBCUs that are really struggling.

Ruth Serven Smith: You know, they've been victims of really systemic disinvestment since they were founded. And so I also see this changing college admissions landscape as a really interesting opportunity to look at how colleges [00:09:00] see their role, how they are planning for enrollment and and even like facilities, investments for like the next 50 years. Um, somebody should call up Alabama A&M. I'll give you a free story because they have a really big, um, enrollment recruiting project going on right now to try and recruit more high powered African American students, especially [00:09:30] for their engineering and teaching programs. So again, I think it's just really interesting. And as a former higher ed reporter, too, I love reporting on colleges. They're often the biggest local employer in their city. They're the source of a lot of local talent. Um, and we try to cover HBCUs in the same way that we cover Auburn and Alabama and help our readers understand that they should be thinking about those local [00:10:00] institutions and. They they think about Auburn and Alabama. So that's my college spiel. Okay.

Eric Stirgus: And I think Secretary Cardona visited Miles College here yesterday. Yes.

Ruth Serven Smith: He was here yesterday. And he went to Miles, which is just down the road.

Eric Stirgus: Yeah. So I'm kind of curious as far as, Miles, do they have some of the infrastructure issues? Because I know in Georgia there are a lot of colleges that HBCUs did just, you know, they don't have the same you know, they have housing infrastructure needs. They have facility [00:10:30] infrastructure needs. Seen historically, they just have not gotten the same level of state and federal investment. And so so that's been a challenge here. I'm guessing it's been a challenge in Miles and other places.

Ruth Serven Smith: Yeah, Miles is very small. It's, I want to say, just has about 2000 students. I don't remember if they have a graduate program actually off the top of my head. So in Alabama, a lot of the [00:11:00] HBCUs became community colleges about 50 years ago. So now they're still kind of historically black universities, but they're in the community college system. Some are private. I was just recently at Oakwood. In Huntsville, where Martin Luther King Junior spoke in the 60s. They're very small and it's a religious school. Um, A&M [00:11:30] is one of the bigger ones. Yeah. So it just, it just really depends on the school.

Audience Member 1: So are you suggesting that some schools may start to see this change as an opportunity to recruit different students that they may not have gotten before? How do you think the colleges might be doing that? Do you think that they may be developing new academic programs [00:12:00] to attract students that they may not have gotten before, that they think they're going to get, you know, maybe a 10% more applications? What do. What you're hearing from colleges is how they may adapt what they do to potentially take advantage of a wider pool of applicants.

Eric Stirgus: It's a good question. I mean, I know after the Supreme Court's ruling on affirmative action, we had Morehouse College reach out to us the following day and wanted to talk to us about all of this. They said, yeah, we're [00:12:30] anticipating an enrollment increase, but the challenge is going to be, you know, can we handle the additional amount of students that will be applying to Morehouse? And they're saying, you know, a lot of each other, HBCUs are going to have to deal with the same thing. We had Spelman College, we have one of their officials is in the front row here. Their president wound up writing an op ed for us about, you know, about how this is going to impact HBCUs and, you know, some of these sorts of issues. So, yeah, they're they do expect to see higher enrollment. [00:13:00] But, you know, the question is going to be, you know, can they manage it? And they say, you know, we're going to need some additional federal help here and some from the state as well.

Audience Member 1: Um, may I add on that? Yeah, please. I think Dr. French, who was here yesterday from Clark Atlanta, spoke on the same issue. You know, Yeah, we expect to get more applications and more students enrolling, but right now he said population is 30,000 applications for 1000 spots. Yeah. And so when you think about how do you handle more he's [00:13:30] calling a homecoming. You know, students are going to want to come, but it's not just having the space for them, you know, having the additional majors and, you know, having the different just the infrastructure that's needed. I mean, spelling small also with 2000 students.

Ruth Serven Smith: I mean, are y'all do you have a. Capital improvement plan right now where you're thinking about expanding the physical space.

Audience Member 1: We have that way. So now you're having to kind of revisit and reinvigorate. And I think we're all just kind of it's [00:14:00] like a wait and see. But we have a five year plan anyway to look at those issues. And now it's like just escalating.

Ruth Serven Smith: You know, I'd be curious. Maybe you can maybe you want to join the panel. But.

Audience Member 1: Um.

Ruth Serven Smith: Another, another really interesting way to think about this, too, is it's, it's from the perspective of students. So it's not even always a recruiting issue. It's students want the HBCU atmosphere. I'm [00:14:30] also hearing from a interesting and growing amount of non African-American students interested in the HBCUs. So Hispanic students, Asian students, international black students. So on and so forth, because they think the schools are great, they think the major is great. It's an opportunity to get a US university education. Um, [00:15:00] and so I'm also hearing from HBCUs that are recruiting and growing number of what you might think of as non traditional HBCU, HBCU students. And that's a really interesting angle. I'd like to see more people covering. Yeah. What's your next topic?

Eric Stirgus: Well, I think it was kind of sort of along those same lines. I think we're just going to I was going to talk about the affirmative action ruling and how this is impacting schools. So, yeah, I guess, you know, kind of what I was just talking about, I think the good part about it for HBCUs [00:15:30] is that they're going to see higher enrollments. But, you know, they're just saying, you know, we're going to need some help here. And, you know, and they're also talking about, you know, this might be a good story for you all as well, looking at, you know, investment from foundations, the philanthropic community. You know, they've long lagged for HBCUs. There was a moment in after, you know, in 2010, after, you know, the killing of George Floyd and the protests where you saw some historic investments by the private sector in HBCUs. You [00:16:00] know, like I think it's Spelman, you all got, what, $40 Million? Yeah. You know, and you know, and, you know, schools like Spelman, you know, they are, you know, seeing some significant investments in some of the some of the others are. But there are others who are not. And so, you know, we had I think, Michael Lomax from the United Negro College Fund. I think he's on a panel here. I don't know if that's already taken place, but he came to our newsroom a few weeks ago and talked about, hey, we need these big donors to step up. You know, I think I'm blanking off the top [00:16:30] of my head of the statistics. But, you know, there are numbers out there that show that. And I can try to find these for you later that show that HBCUs are historically underfunded by the private sector. So we've reported on that and I would encourage you all to do so in you can do that.

Ruth Serven Smith: So one thing that can be confusing for students, though, is how to navigate the scholarship system for HBCUs, because UNCf just funds private schools, right? Yeah. Yeah. So I've talked to people that enroll in a private school, get a UNCf scholarship,

which is [00:17:00] great. And I've also talked to people who've enrolled in a public school, applied for UNCf and then are told, no, we can't give you a scholarship. And so then they rely on public public aid or Pell Grants or something, which so all that to say it can be really confusing for a student to navigate.

Eric Stirgus: I think you had your hand raised.

Audience Member 1: Yeah, No, I was just going to say Thurgood Marshall College usually funds for the public.

Eric Stirgus: Yeah, yeah.

Audience Member 1: So but it is all about knowing before you.

Ruth Serven Smith: Even knowing where it is. Yeah. Yeah. You want [00:17:30] to use student loans for.

Eric Stirgus: I was going to let you go to your next topic.

Ruth Serven Smith: Yeah. If you guys next on the. Okay. I'm just looking at the sheet.

Eric Stirgus: Okay. Yeah. So think this is a good segway to talk about student loan debt. You know obviously we know the Supreme Court also voted down the president's debt forgiveness plan. And I think Secretary Cardona was here yesterday. I think I heard him say that that would have wiped out debt for about 40% of black students or black borrowers, I should [00:18:00] say. So, you know, that's not happening now. And so I know his you know, the Biden administration, Biden-Harris administration is looking at some ways to, you know, help students. I know their SAVE plan is one idea, like an income debt relief plan. And we're seeing more colleges go towards that route individually. So, you know, if you're having reported on that yet, that might be something that you might want to take a look back in your hometowns and states. You know, there obviously, you know, we know that the numbers show that, [00:18:30] you know, black borrowers in general, you know, are paying higher, you know, have more loan debt, particularly black women. We're working on a story about that now in our newsroom. You know, looking at looking a little more closely at that issue. The Center for Responsible Lending is a great resource, too, for. Well, if you're looking for good research on that topic. They're based in North Carolina.

Ruth Serven Smith: And can you repeat that again?

Eric Stirgus: The center for. Oh, sorry. Yes, the Center for Responsible Lending. Yeah. [00:19:00] Yeah, We've used them in the past. They have some great experts there who can talk about that. There may be organizations in your state that can talk about some of these issues as well. Like in Georgia. We have the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute. And so, you know, or the Southern Education Foundation, you know, if you're looking for regional information or if there's not an organization in your state and you're in the South, I would suggest you reach out

to them. They can probably give you some good data. They can probably some good experts for you. [00:19:30] Repeat that name.

Audience Member 2: One more time.

Eric Stirgus: Oh, the Southern Education Foundation. Yeah, sure.

Ruth Serven Smith: Yeah. Student loans are huge. One thing we also try to do in some of our reporting is kind of push against the stereotype of student loan borrowers, mostly being 22 year olds. We know that's not true. We know that actually lots of people are parents of college students. We know that lots [00:20:00] of borrowers took out loans when they were 22 and now are 40 and 50 and still paying them off. The majority of maybe you can correct me if I'm misquoting this, but the majority of student loan borrowers, borrowers hold very small amounts of debt. Right. Yeah. And the people who have the most trouble paying them off are people who didn't finish college, which makes sense [00:20:30] because they didn't achieve the higher, higher purchasing power of a college degree. So all that to say there's a there's often a political stereotype of people. You just need to kind of suck it up and pay their loans. And we without getting political about it, we try to push back and say a lot of these people at the time they took their loans out were victims of a predatory system [00:21:00] and are still victims of a predatory system that gives, you know, a certain people don't get equitable wages. Certain people, you know, are paying off children's loans. And so the systemic inequities just stack and stack and stack and what can we actually really do about that? And so as journalist, part of our role of helping people have that national conversation. Is by being honest about who actually has student loans. [00:21:30] And so anytime we write the stories, I mean, just in terms of content views, they go crazy because people see themselves reflected in coverage. And that doesn't happen very often. Yeah.

Eric Stirgus: Yeah. I was thinking about what you were just saying about the push back. And like any time we write a story about student loan debt, you know, we will get readers who will say, well, when I was in school, you know, I paid off my debt and why can't these kids do the same? And they don't realize that many of these students are working multiple jobs while they're going through school right now. And [00:22:00] they're you know, they're doing the same things that they did. But just college is just more expensive then. And so, yeah, so to your point, yeah, you know, we have to, you know, and I recognize that and I make sure that our stories reflect that and finding students who can talk about, you know, yes, we are doing a lot of, you know, we're working outside of class, We're doing other things. And then to your point about parents, you know, just, you know, parent plus loans are, you know, been a particularly large top issue for black borrowers. And that's kind of why [00:22:30] Robert Smith wound up, you know, wiping out the student loan debt for the Morehouse College class of 2019 because, you know, when he went to campus before he gave his commencement address, he ran into students and parents who were telling him that. And he was unaware of that issue. And so I think it really raised that to the forefront. And so I think that's a story that we continue to should continue to keep track of and report on.

Ruth Serven Smith: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. Um, the next one of my top ten stories to think about is home schooling. [00:23:00] There's been a big increase in African American parents who are homeschooling. So I did a story about two years ago on people who, you know, obviously everybody got a crash course with schooling during the pandemic, um, willingly or unwillingly. And I interviewed a few parents in 2021 when Alabama schools were reopening who chose [00:23:30] to keep their kids at home. And I didn't actually set out to report on black parents homeschooling, but I kept finding moms and dads who were black and who were homeschooling. And I was like, Wow, this is super interesting. There is a Georgia professor. I'm losing her name right now who is an expert in African American homeschooling. Do you know who I'm talking?

Eric Stirgus: I was going to ask you to write this down. Um.

Ruth Serven Smith: Well, if you [00:24:00] look at my story, she's interviewed. Um, I just blanked on her name, but she does a really interesting because anecdotally, people have been talking about this for a while, but she has the actual research on it. Um, and she's surveyed families on their choice to homeschool. Why they do it. A lot of times, sometimes it's political. Like, I want to be able to teach my child African-American history. And their school [00:24:30] only does that for two weeks in February.

But also a lot of it gets back to special education and students with disabilities. And that was something else I was going to going to talk about later. Um, people who don't need to rely on the school system for maybe therapy or a specialized dyslexia, um, often find that they would just rather do it at home and know that it's being done well [00:25:00] and be able to take their child to all of their appointments. Um, so that's a growing trend we're seeing across the country. It's really interesting. A lot of people are looking for resources about how to homeschool. Um, a lot of people are also then thinking about like the ecosystem that expands out beyond that of if my child is homeschooled. Um, how can I do club sports or how can I do so [00:25:30] on and so forth that a school would normally provide? How can I do social activities and kind of recreational stuff? So yes.

Audience Member 2: My name is William Ford. I'm part of Maryland Matters of state and government politics. I came in late, so please forgive me. Was there any discussion about. Schools, not colleges and universities, not enrolling enough young people who want [00:26:00] to teach in the profession.

Ruth Serven Smith: We haven't talked about that yet, but we can. Yeah.

Audience Member 2: This is why I asked. Yeah, I've been willing to. Serious. It's a plan in Maryland called the Blueprint for Maryland's Future Education Reform and didn't even have to fill out the form. There's there's been list of what the school systems have noted, and it's showing a lot of young people aren't going into the education committee. One major nugget, internships, [00:26:30] they're not getting paid, unlike other majors. So they go back and forth to from their campus. Yeah. Or to the to the school they have to teach. Yeah. And it's all on them. That's why that's why I asked if you're seeing it in Georgia and.

Ruth Serven Smith: You want to take maybe college enrollment generally.

Eric Stirgus: And yeah, I was going to talk a little bit about that later. But to your point now about teachers, I know Secretary Cardona [00:27:00] talked about that for a minute yesterday because there was a question specifically asked about the lack of black male teachers nationally. And I think a lot of school districts, I mean, not a lot of school districts, but a lot of schools are recognizing that and creating what they call grow your own programs. Yes. Yes. Okay. Yeah. So they're giving financial incentives to teachers to work, particularly in low income schools or schools that have, you know, low gradient. Not so you know a lot about this. But yeah, for those of you who don't. Yeah. So there's there's [00:27:30] some concerted efforts out there to try to do some of that work, but there's a lot more that needs to be done on that front. I think research shows that students who are taught by teachers who look like them typically do perform better. And so, you know, so, you know, so like I said, you know, some enough yet there is some work that's being done, but there's a lot more that needs to be done.

Ruth Serven Smith: Um, I can I can follow up on that and then take your question. Yes, it's a huge problem around the country. I talked to an education [00:28:00] Dean recently who has ten teacher candidates graduating this year. That is not enough. So there's compounding issues, right, of a lot of older teachers retiring, a lot of school districts, enrollments changing. And so maybe high qualified good teachers in those districts are losing their positions and they just don't want to move elsewhere. It's really hard to be a teacher right now. Lots of people are just [00:28:30] looking for jobs elsewhere where they can get paid a lot more and not have to deal with all the trauma and the stress. Grow your own programs are really interesting. I think a lot of school districts are turning to those partially out of desperation, somewhat, um, especially in rural communities. You could you could call Alabama A&M. Their teacher program is specifically sending African American male teachers to a local Huntsville [00:29:00] City school district. Um, the name of the program is M a l e. Um, and I'm interested to see what success for that looks like.

Ruth Serven Smith: We also have reported recently on a very small rural Alabama district that has an exploding population of Spanish speaking English language learner students, and they realized that they were recruiting [00:29:30] a lot of ELL aides to work with the school who were local and grew up in the school district. And so then they decided to formalize that into a grow your own program and get those people actual teacher certifications. So that they could make more money and save the school district. Um, Russellville City schools in Alabama. Um, so, yeah, I mean, grow your own programs [00:30:00] are great. I would I would encourage anybody to call up your local school district, see if they're doing anything, see how it's working. A big problem is schools will recruit teachers and then not spend any time retaining them. So if you have a program in place, ask for success numbers. How are they measuring success? How long are is the tenure of most teachers in the program? How many teachers, if they're recruited to a high poverty [00:30:30] district, stay in the district because there's often a transfer to somewhere else? So anyways.

Eric Stirgus: Yeah, there's one school district in our area that's starting in a grow Your own program. And they said that the requirement that they're giving them, I think 30 to $35,000

stipends, but you know, the requirements you have to work in that district for five years. And so to the to your point also about teacher retention, you know, it's you know, it's been a challenge nationally. And like in Georgia, [00:31:00] we did a three part series this year when we filed all three first year teachers through their entire school year. And two of the three are are leaving. It was a variety of reasons to do so. They're doing so. But, you know, just speaks to that larger issue. And then I was just going to kind of piggyback on what you were talking about a minute ago about homeschooling. And so, yeah, it's it's kind of difficult to find a good research out there. So but there are numbers that do show that there is an increase in homeschooling, particularly [00:31:30] among black families. I met with a group of homeschooling parents about a week ago and some of the reasons that they were telling me that you're seeing more of that, particularly among black families, is because they feel like, you know, the curriculum doesn't speak to black students. And they're also concerned about at school violence. They want to keep their kids safe. And so, you know, that's been a particular issue, particularly post pandemic, where we have seen, you know, school discipline numbers, [00:32:00] you know, regarding in-school suspensions and out-of-school suspensions increase. And you see the videos on social media, you know, classroom bullying and classroom attacks. And so they're worried about that. And so you're seeing more more families doing that and also seen more teachers going to the home school route.

Ruth Serven Smith: Can I can I make a quick point and then take your question and your question whenever I think it's very tempting to write about school safety right now, and we should, because it's also a big reason why teachers are leaving. Thanks for [00:32:30] stopping by. Um, but we always try and make distinctions between bullying, safety, security, discipline and over discipline because they are all similar but different things. And so we try to rely on the numbers so that people don't conflate them in ways that may be harmful for students. Yes.

Audience Member 1: Um, I would. You kind of answered it. It was about homeschooling. But do you think [00:33:00] that it's also on the rise.

Audience Member 3: Just because of the CRT? And I mean, is it so is it so simple as to. Well, I want my child to learn about this, so I'm just going to homeschool them or, you know, or is there a financial impact involved in it? Well, I would think that it would be I would think that homeschooling would be out of control. Like you would think that, well, so many parents are upset with the public [00:33:30] school system that they would just, you know, well, I'm just going to my kid. So is it that easy or.

Ruth Serven Smith: It does depend on your state. Some states require homeschool parents and students to register, but that shouldn't really be enough of an obstacle where if you wanted to do it, you couldn't do it.

Eric Stirgus: Yeah. Yeah. I was going to say, yeah, there are requirements that Georgia and what some of these homeschooling parents I met with last week just last week said to me was that they're seeing that there are parents who are trying to homeschool, [00:34:00] but they don't have the resources or the real clear understanding of what it takes. And so they're seeing their

students, their kids are, you know, failing, you know, some state wide requirements for their kids. And so that's been an issue that they want to see further addressed.

Ruth Serven Smith: But there are co ops, so there are African American co ops for homeschool students where you could if your student struggles with math and you as a parent don't want to teach them math, you can get them to a co op [00:34:30] and take math from somebody who's better than you are. Yeah, I did look up the expert I mentioned earlier. Her name is Cheryl Fields Smith. She's a great interview. She works at the University of Georgia.

Audience Member 1: Yes, I'm from Philadelphia and just transitioned from full time broadcast news to comms for the school district, something that we have found in the growing your own. We have grown your own for teachers [00:35:00] where they come out of college debt free. We also have elevation programs for principals, but something that we just found in the grow Your Own. There isn't enough coaching, tutoring, mentoring at the college level. And we've connected with HBCUs, Ivy League College in Philadelphia, and there isn't everyone says, yes, we need more teachers, but we don't see their GPA showing that they've had adequate coaching and teaching. That's one point. But the other thing I [00:35:30] wanted to ask you all, in what you're doing, do you find that every press conference and because I know what journalists want, especially back to school stories and then I have to extend it for the year we try to have. Special events highlighting teachers. Teachers who represent the diversity of the community. Special programs like We have a big bus tour going on now in every neighborhood in Philadelphia, because as coming on you, I found out that parents are showing up day one. Yes. No immunizations, [00:36:00] right? No registration, no uniform. And it's like, I know you all haven't been down the shore beach all summer, you know, because our folks don't do that. But with every press conference, there comes a time when it's pivoted to safety because we know we've had a large number of students, students who were. Actively. Do you all find that as well? Because I'm having to know the stats like that and then have the chief of school safety or school safety officers are [00:36:30] not armed like many in the country, but police are in the neighborhood. Or do you all find that And how do you how do you navigate it?

Eric Stirgus: Well, in the school districts in our area, I think, you know, a lot of the back to school news conferences that the school districts are having are focused around safety. And it's you know, I think they realize that it's a concern among parents. They realize that, you know, many of the news outlets want to do those types of stories, you know, as opposed to the stories about the immunization. And so, [00:37:00] you know, I think some school districts will try to, you know, slide that in there as well and some of those important topics. But yeah, but but but primarily it's about the safety stuff, right? About safety.

Audience Member 1: Yeah. And I get it as a parent, but my kids are older now.

Ruth Serven Smith: Yeah, I, I'd be interested in talking later. I think it sounds like there's two things a little bit at play. One is you're trying to get a good message out. The other is you're answering the questions. Um, and [00:37:30] since my school district, my team is statewide, um, we don't always cover like the nice, um, the nice things that are happening, you know, the spot features and we're also not broadcast so we don't have to fill the each hour. But we do find that

those things do great on social media. So I send my social media producer to them and it might be a matter of just connecting with a different person in the newsroom. Um, [00:38:00] the other thing, to answer your point, I really try to encourage my team. To think about what is useful for parents. And so a press conference is not always necessarily useful for parents, but knowing when the first day of school is and like you said, are we every year we run a story about [00:38:30] here are all the school starts states in the state and it goes crazy because think about all the people that want to know that information, not just parents, but people who want to know, Oh, my commute is going to change, people who are planning events, people who are in sports. And it's just not like dates that people have in the back of their head. Um, we also do a lot of like back to school coverage focused on exactly those things that you mentioned. [00:39:00] Here's what shots you need, here's how to fill out your free and reduced price lunch form. Here's how to talk to your teacher. Here's what apps you need to download this month. Here's what to do when all the apps you need to download are driving you crazy. And so we just try to like chunk out that like service information. Um, and people really respond to it. So it's not always about news for us. It's also about providing information [00:39:30] that helps parents and communities support schools better.

Audience Member 1: Yeah, I just hired a social media producer and she's a great storyteller, and I'm telling her we're on the same page as far as vision. But it's interesting in that some even some administrators say we have a hard time driving our parents to the individual school websites. Right. And I get it. You know, they're picking up the school websites.

Ruth Serven Smith: Are also really hard to use.

Audience Member 1: So. So [00:40:00] we have two people that we're going to be their goal right now is to have it redone by the end of September. I don't want anything where I've got to put 5 or 6 things to find information that's needed. As a parent, I'm thinking in that zone.

Ruth Serven Smith: If I can also just say one other thing, too. One thing we try to think about when we write service stories is that everyone's reading them on their phone and that not everyone has data or regular Wi-Fi access. And so [00:40:30] especially to that point about links, if you have to click through a bunch of links, I'm done. Yeah. I mean, like honestly. If somebody doesn't have a data plan on their phone, they've just used up all their data for the week. Like, why would I make somebody do that? And so it's those like little things that can really make a difference in getting the right information to the right people.

Eric Stirgus: And then to your point about those service call news, you can use type stories and some of them do very well for us online. [00:41:00] You know, like, you know, we ran something about after the Supreme Court decision on student loan debt. You know, when the Biden Harris administration announced some of their initial plans to help students in the aftermath of that. And I was really surprised by I mean, it was just a short, simple story outlining some of the things that they're going to try to do. And it was like one of our top stories for the following day. So things like that or when we write about, you know, the financial the Fafsa form, you know, the financial aid form that students have to fill [00:41:30] out to get their financial aid. You know, just sort of an explainer on how that works. You know, those types of stories do very

well. It's just, you know, you just got to find that right and find them at the right time and then, you know, just make it simple. And then also, you know, just, you know, getting it to them when they, you know, in a way that it's user friendly.

Ruth Serven Smith: I have a I have another story tip if you are national, write about the new online Fafsa form.

Audience Member 1: Yeah, we have Fafsa for school district sponsors, too.

Ruth Serven Smith: I think I think we're about [00:42:00] to run out of time and we're definitely not going to get through all of our ten. Do you want to just go to questions or do you want.

Eric Stirgus: Yeah, and I'll just do the my last couple of things real quick. One, you know, when we were talking about who's being disciplined in schools, you know, those are always good stories to be on the lookout for. You know, I think your your communities probably have resources of people who are paying attention to that sort of stuff. Nationally. You have here in Alabama, the Equal Justice Initiative in Georgia, one of our community groups is they call themselves [00:42:30] the Gwinnett Stop and Stop. And it's like the school to prison pipeline, you know, so I'm sure that there's a group out there that's monitoring this or and stuff and, you know, and so try to find them and use them in your work. We were talking about college enrollment and there's a decline nationally among black students. Part of it is because of, you know, some of the resource issues and then some of it is because of, you know, you know, political reasons. But then there's [00:43:00] also, you know, I think nationally we're seeing where there are fewer births. Yes. And so I think colleges are worried about it. And so, you know, we've written about it some of that in Georgia. And, you know, if you haven't done so already, it's probably something that you should be on the look out for. And then the last thing I'll just mention before we go to Q and A on my end is, you know, dress codes. You know, we did a story this week about a local school district that is revising its dress codes because they had some students call them out last year and say that your dress codes were discriminatory against students [00:43:30] of color and against girls. They did their own homework and found that while the school district students of color represented about 68% of the school district students, 80% of those students who were disciplined for dress code violations were students of color.

Ruth Serven Smith: So yeah, maybe just a few other notes for me. Um, IEPs and special education are hot topics. We also know that just statistically, the majority [00:44:00] of students identified as students with disabilities under idea are students of color. Um, I also wanted to just shout out the bread and butter education topics of math and reading. Parents want to understand how to help their kids be better at math and reading. Those stories are super important. Um, I also wanted to shout out early childhood education, if [00:44:30] you think about it from a workforce perspective. Kids want to know how long they have to pay for child care, and they really want to know if pre-K is enrolling younger students. They want to know how to get there. They want to know what's safe. They want to know which facilities have been reported to DA for violations. They want to know how come my daycare is closing all the time?

It's because there's not enough workers. So those stories go a long [00:45:00] ways. And if you can get the angle right, they reach a lot of people. Finally, I also just wanted to shout out LGBTQ civil rights coverage. We've seen. I think the there's been a pivot, at least for me, locally in Alabama, from CRT to LGBTQ. And there is an effort to demonize those students and make school districts afraid [00:45:30] of serving them equally and equitably. Um, those stories are super important to tell. So that's my soapbox on that. I'm happy to keep talking. We can answer some. Questions for the panel. And then I also just wanted to quickly shout out, I have this little bingo sheet that I made up for my reporters at one time. It's like silly stuff, like meet a source for coffee. But if you're kind of feeling stuck on the beat, I would encourage [00:46:00] you to take one. If you do it all within a month, I will mail you a nice little prize. So. Okay. Questions?

Audience Member 4: Oh, I'm very impressed with the bingo card. My name is Clay Gutzmer. I'm a freelance journalist from Miami, Florida. I want to expand first of all, thank you for the panel. I want to expand my portfolio into education. What other government policies or educational policy studies I could do besides Ron DeSantis changing everything?

Ruth Serven Smith: Well, can you ask [00:46:30] that question again? Oh, I'm so sorry.

Audience Member 4: What other government educational policy stories I can write as a journalist as well. That it's everywhere. Just Ron DeSantis just changing everything.

Audience Member 2: Follow the money. Yeah, that's a start. Yeah. Where's the money going to? Who's, you know.

Eric Stirgus: Who's being funded? You know, I think we see disproportionately, you know, historically like school districts that are in black and brown communities don't get the same levels of funding as, [00:47:00] you know, some of the wealthier school districts. So that's an obvious one. I'll let you.

Ruth Serven Smith: Yeah, no, that's a good question. I mean, I could I could talk all day about education, story ideas. Um, another interesting thing to think about might be, um. Well, I'm trying to think of what would be useful in Florida. Um, here's here's one that's kind of off the wall. [00:47:30] I've been trying to get more people to think about the intersections of climate change coverage and education. That might be useful in Florida, but if you just think about, like, the physical buildings, are they prepared for hot days? Does the school bus have air conditioning? Yeah.

Audience Member 2: Hot stuff.

Ruth Serven Smith: So.

Audience Member 4: It's no pun intended. It's just absolutely just. Yeah, I would just.

Ruth Serven Smith: I would just. And I think, too, there's a lot [00:48:00] of power in from an education perspective, especially not being afraid to call things what they are. So if you're looking to break into education news, like if somebody is being a racist, call them a racist, you

don't need to be afraid of using that word and your competitors will be afraid of using that word. Um, so I always encourage younger education journalists to, to think about like what their personal perspective can bring to the table [00:48:30] and how it would differentiate your coverage if you're not being smothered by an editor who doesn't believe in you.

Eric Stirgus: And then I would just also add, I mean, like if you're doing a different beat and you're looking to do something on the education front, you know, we're seeing a lot more being done now with colleges where, you know, where they're working with people who are incarcerated. You know, and programs to help them gain their degrees. So, you know, there there are organizations who are clamoring for news outlets [00:49:00] to do those types of stories. So it's a it's a quick hit. It's an important story. And it's something that I think would probably be that's a great idea.

Ruth Serven Smith: This is the this is the federal government is restarting offering Pell Grants to people in prison. That's a great story idea. And I would encourage everybody to ask your local college if they are facilitating that, because it can be really hard to actually fill out the financial aid form if you are in jail [00:49:30] or prison. Aid groups might be helping do that. Local colleges might be starting partner programs. Yeah.

Audience Member 5: I have a story idea I just want to share as well. I work at the News Literacy Project where we help young people learn how to tell fact from fiction. We also provide educators with free resources to teach it. And so we have educators in all 50 states who are using our resources and helping kids [00:50:00] understand how to tell fact and fiction. So if anybody ever wanted to connect with an educator, we can connect. You talk to the students, talk to the educator. Students have great stories about going to their parents and telling, No, dad, that's wrong. You know, that didn't happen. So please connect with me and I'm happy to share some ideas on that.

Audience Member 6: Hi. So I came in a little late. Sorry if you guys had may have already addressed this, but one some areas of coverage or one area [00:50:30] in particularly that I think is under covered is teachers pensions and the attrition and retention of teachers as to why we're seeing a disproportionate amount of teachers, whether specifically teachers of color not wanting to to teach in secondary education. Primary education is because of this lack of safety net for a nest egg in retirement. So I'm in Chicago. I know Chicago has one of the worst pension funds for teachers. [00:51:00] Atlanta is pretty good. I'm just curious to get you guys thoughts on that area of coverage and how it needs to be. You know, basically prodded on a little bit more from journalists, especially when it comes to following the money, as you said. Yeah, you're.

Eric Stirgus: Right. I mean, it's something that I don't think we do enough of in our newsroom. I mean, I've thought about it, you know, like getting our folks to look at that. And, you know, Atlanta is a little better. And, you know, with their teacher pensions and then other places. And so I think there really hasn't been the alarm yet. But I think if the economy goes south, you [00:51:30] know, it's going to be a problem. Yes.

Ruth Serven Smith: So do you ever cover meetings or look at the financial statements of where the pension is invested?

Audience Member 6: Yeah, one in I mean, I know Atlanta's teacher pension fund is very heavily invested in equity, maybe a few bonds. But I know I saw essentially the pension fund tank because it was so like I want to say 85% was in equities, but it rebounded. Of course, because, you know, the market fluctuates. But I was I asked teachers and even some educators, [00:52:00] is that unnerving to you that so much of the pension fund is allocated towards stock? And they were like, well, this happens all the time. And I just didn't feel like it was a sufficient enough answer, especially for teachers who are on the verge of retiring. Right? Like if you're younger, of course you're a little bit more risk acceptant gray.

Ruth Serven Smith: Area of coverage. You should definitely keep pushing on that.

Eric Stirgus: Yeah. And we have another education editor whom I saw I don't know if you want to say they got that.

Audience Member 2: I used to be a K-12 editor, and one of the ways that we wrote about that is [00:52:30] how districts, states are spending.

Audience Member 3: More money on pensions now that they're spending on education. Illinois is like a classic example of this.

Audience Member 2: This is going to be more prolific in the near future. So I think a lot of times we write about this, how this affects teachers, which is a.

Audience Member 5: Good angle, cetera.

Audience Member 2: Another way is how this.

Audience Member 3: Diverting funds away from district.

Audience Member 2: Like urban districts in particular, the ones that actually don't have to worry.

Ruth Serven Smith: You might also consider the caveats. So [00:53:00] I haven't I haven't covered teacher pensions very much, but I used to work in Virginia and there was a lawmaker who essentially figured out how to get pensions from to, sorry, this is not going to make sense in the words that I'm going to say it. But he he figured out how to get keep his state pension fund, leave his university job, and then [00:53:30] get hired as a consultant at a different firm. So he was pulling he was pulling double dipping. Double dipping? Yeah. It was more than double dipping because he wasn't a state employee anymore. So all that to say if you ask around a little bit, I bet you'll find stories like that and people get big mad about it.

Audience Member 2: There are also retired teachers associations and their pensions are being affected. They'll show up at the board meetings. Sometimes you'll see them. You see old people at [00:54:00] board meetings. It's usually.

Audience Member 1: Because. Yeah, because.

Audience Member 7: Yeah, that's.

Ruth Serven Smith: I think she had a question first. Okay.

Audience Member 1: First, thank you for expanding that conversation a little bit. For some reason, I thought you said nutrition and retention. Nutrition? No. No. I'm just saying. But that was I wrote that. I was like, oh, she's a. But just a super quick comment as we were talking about, like the lack of going into teaching. I'm actually in education, so [00:54:30] I'm an associate dean. But one I find it fascinating because I have young nieces and nephews that the first job they ever won is to be a teacher. And a lot of times kids, they'll say, I want to be a teacher or and then something else. So it's it's fascinating how later it shifts. And I say that because I attended an accreditation conference this year. And one of the things that was discussed was the role that certain TV shows play [00:55:00] on career choice. So so one, there was the general news coverage, especially with Covid 19, the influx going into health care. But then there are other things such as law shows and, you know, other but then certain ones that don't get coverage. Like I don't know if Abbott Elementary is going to bring an influx teacher, but, you know, they're just talking about.

Eric Stirgus: How it's working in Philadelphia when finished.

Audience Member 1: And. No, but I'm just saying it's just interesting because one, [00:55:30] there's research out there, but to actually like do a story on that, it would be really fascinating that, you know, just how TV plays a role in career choice. And so just.

Eric Stirgus: Yeah, I was curious, like what you're saying in Philadelphia, because I mean, we wound up doing a story about like how teachers in Atlanta would feel about elementary, right?

Audience Member 1: I've never seen it, by the way. You haven't what so.

So so far I'm.

Audience Member 1: Actually planning [00:56:00] and Joyce Abbott Day and what I was told was when the show first started, everyone hated principals especially did not like their portrayal. But folks have come to love Glenda Shirley. Ralph, as you know, is married to one of our state senators. So they're always there. So that's a hot topic right now is the whole Abbott Elementary and what I said to the teaching profession. Some other hot stories that we have done in our area or that I have kind of thrown it out there to see the reaction. School [00:56:30] selection. I could not go to one I seminar yesterday because I was doing interviews about school selection. School lotteries is a hot topic now across the country. Some chancellors or superintendents have lost their jobs because of that. Something else that's hot drag queen shows in

conservative communities. You know, some of the Republicans have fought back. We have allowed it because we are very much we see everything [00:57:00] through an equity lens. Some other hot stories would be the first day of school. We have the superintendent and some of his assistants walking people to school. I think everybody is doing that now. Yeah, but this year, because the Lion King is in town, we're going to have Lion King cast members also join in and give out swag.

Audience Member 1: But that's only because we're in Philadelphia. You know, we have access to that musical programs. We have students because we're in Philly. We [00:57:30] have students who do open mic night at the Four Seasons. And so Sting may drop by. Jill. Jill Scott may drop by. Boys to men may drop by. But again, it's only because of where we are. So if you're in a community that has these concerts, look into that. Alicia Keys was there two days before Beyonce. She gave out 150. It's for students to go to the concert. So we sort of went along, you know, to see how they would react to it. [00:58:00] So there's some good things that we are able to show. But still, I have like I said, I've got to deal with the safety piece. So first day we have two programs. One is where participants in the community are hired to walk the safe paths, but it's only dismissing. Another one is the safety zone program where police officers are hired. We're having the hardest time. Getting people to sign up for them. Yeah.

Ruth Serven Smith: You know.

Audience Member 1: But those are just a [00:58:30] couple of the hot things that we're doing right now. We elevate all of our Latinx. Teachers. Superintendents. My top two leaders under the superintendent are Latinos. So anything like that that you can dig into and make relationships with, which I'm sure both of you as seasoned professionals, do you know how that works?

Ruth Serven Smith: Yeah.

Audience Member 1: You know.

Ruth Serven Smith: Maybe I. I was just. I [00:59:00] was also just going to comment, Uh, you know, I fought really hard when I first got hired as an education reporter to do positive stories. But not only positive stories, because education historically is seen as a fluff beat staffed by women who do stories that nobody else wants to do. And I see [00:59:30] it as an accountability also. And so I would encourage anybody in the room who's a reporter to be thinking about how you can beef up your data and investigative skills. And I'm happy to talk about how to do that because, again, I always go back to schools, and universities are often the biggest local employer. They have millions and sometimes billions of dollars at hand. There's a lot of money floating around. And, you know, our community deserves to know what's happening with all of [01:00:00] that and to know that every child is actually getting a good education and all of the opportunities possible. So, yeah, it can be it can be both. And and I'm glad people spokespeople are interested in facilitating that.

Eric Stirgus: Yeah. And I was just going to add. Yeah, like the first day of school, like last year in Atlanta, we wound up covering something where there were men who showed up the first day

of school in a particular school, you know, just to show that, [01:00:30] Hey, we are here and these are black men. And so I think that that's happening in communities. I mean, we're just trying to find, you know, if you're unaware of it, you know, to try to see if that's happening, you know, for those first day of school.

Audience Member 1: The Divine Nine members. Yeah. Yeah. Women and men.

Ruth Serven Smith: Yeah. Our local mayor makes a point of visiting a lot of local elementary schools, and he wears a suit because he wants people to see, you know, like, looking sharp. And so, yeah, that's a great way to just kind of show support and, [01:01:00] you know, the power of finishing school. Yeah.

Audience Member 2: I know. It's 1130. Yeah, we're over time.

Ruth Serven Smith: Thank you so much.

We're going to have you follow up.