



STATE OF THE EDUCATION BEAT 2016

A Field With A Future

Education journalists have the critically important task of informing the public about education at the local, state, and national levels. But little is known about this sector of the news media. What does this workforce look like? Do education journalists believe their work matters? Are they satisfied in their jobs? What challenges does the field face to better informing public dialogue on education?

Last fall, the Education Writers Association (EWA) teamed up with the Education Week Research Center to answer these and other questions in a first-of-its-kind online national survey and follow-up interviews. The result is this report, [State of the Education Beat 2016](#).

The report offers comprehensive new data that provides the field with important baseline information. The findings can be used to inform decisions about resources devoted to the education beat, and for assessments by media outlets of how they cover – or do not cover – education.

State of the Education Beat also tells a compelling story, and a hopeful one. Two-thirds of respondents say education journalism is going in the right direction at their news outlets. A majority hold that view of the field as a whole. The report challenges the widely accepted narrative that education is a steppingstone beat with negligible prestige.

The survey's more than 400 respondents revealed that the typical education journalist is 36 years old with 11 years of experience. The report further shows how education journalists differ from journalists overall. Seventy-one percent of education journalists are female, compared with 38 percent of journalists as a whole. Also, one in five education journalists is nonwhite, compared with 9 percent for the profession at large.

State of the Education Beat indicates that 79 percent of education journalists are very or fairly satisfied with their jobs. They are committed to their beats and believe deeply that their reporting is making a difference in their communities, the data and interview responses show. Here's how one journalist put it: "I wrote this big story that got picked up across the state. Now it's like one of the most heated discussions in the state. Nobody knew about it until I wrote about it."

But this is not to say education journalism is without challenges – some of them significant and reflective of the long-term health of the field and public access to high-quality education coverage. Two messages in particular stand out: Education journalists want more time for in-depth coverage and colleagues with more education expertise.

Many also are concerned that pressure to generate web traffic can put popularity above substance in editorial decision-making. "I could spend all week working on something that I thought was really great or really earth-shattering and the next week maybe my traffic has risen by a tenth of a percent. It's kind of deflating," said one reporter.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE REPORT



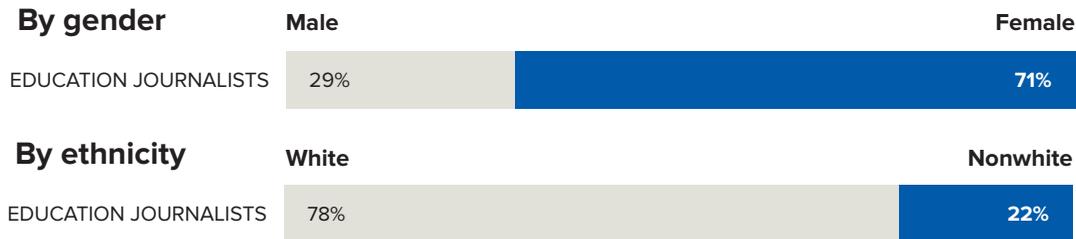
- 1. Education journalism is a field with a future.** Education journalists see the beat as a capstone, not a steppingstone: 79 percent of survey respondents say education is a career path they are committed to pursuing. Millennial education journalists have substantially higher confidence levels, a finding that bodes well for the future of the field.
- 2. Journalists believe their work has a positive impact on education.** One of the most dramatic — and heartening — findings to emerge from the *State of the Education Beat* study is that 95 percent of all education journalists feel their work is making a difference.
- 3. No shortage of challenges.** Sixty-five percent of respondents say responsibility for covering (or supervising coverage of) too many aspects of education leaves them little time for in-depth education journalism. And one-third find it difficult to get in-person access to schools and college campuses.
- 4. Education journalists have high levels of confidence in their field.** *State of the Education Beat* introduces the Education Journalism Confidence Index, which uses 13 survey questions to assess respondents' overall perceptions of their field. Seventy-six percent express confidence in their sector. Also, 67 percent say education journalism at their own news outlet is going in the right direction.
- 5. Inequality is undercovered; testing and finance will be the top stories.** Asked to name the most undercovered issue in education, inequality stood out. The most commonly cited “top stories” for the 2016-17 school year are testing and finance.
- 6. Television gets low marks from peers for coverage of education.** If the Confidence Index has an outlier, it is the perception of TV news. Just 5 percent of study participants express confidence in TV education news, compared with 72 percent for newspapers.
- 7. Public relations efforts are an important part of education coverage.** News releases, news conferences, or public relations professionals are the top sources of story ideas for education journalists who took the survey.
- 8. Teachers and faculty members are key sources.** Asked to identify sources they turned to in the last month to inform coverage, journalists report a virtual tie for first place between teachers/faculty members (89 percent) and news releases, news conferences, and PR professionals (88 percent). Other top sources? News coverage, local educational leaders/school districts, and school/campus visits.
- 9. Is the education beat shrinking? Yes and no.** Although 32 percent of respondents say their education news staffs declined over the past two years, 27 percent report growth and 41 percent say the size didn't change. However, education-focused news outlets are more likely to indicate growth than general-interest media.
- 10. The salary gap.** As with the overall journalism workforce, a wage gap exists for education journalists by gender. Full-time male education journalists make about \$3,000 a year more, on average, than their female counterparts.

Download the full report at EWA.org/BeatReport.

EDUCATION JOURNALISM: A FIELD WITH A FUTURE



Faces of Education Journalism



Note: The data in this chart includes full-time employees only.

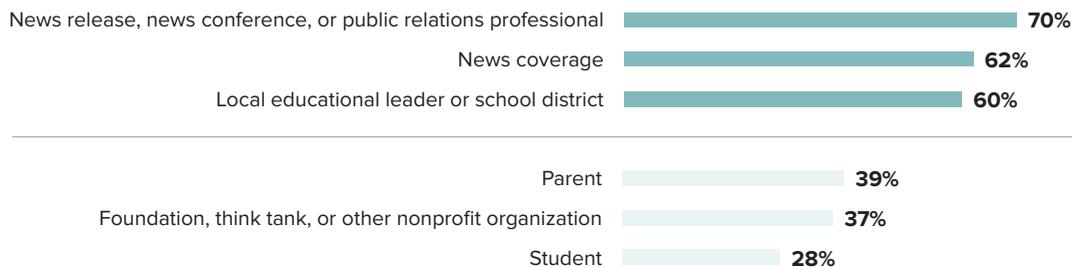
Geographic Focus of Education Journalists



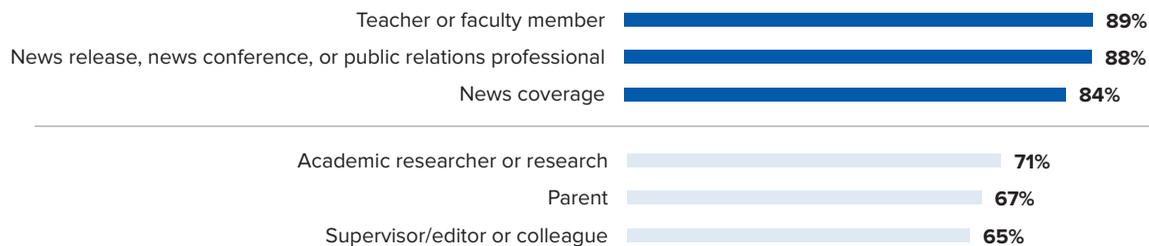
Sources

Education journalists look far and wide for insight.

Most and Least Frequently Cited Sources of Story Ideas:



Most and Least Frequently Cited Sources of Information for Stories:



Note: Totals do not add up to 100 percent because journalists could select more than one category.

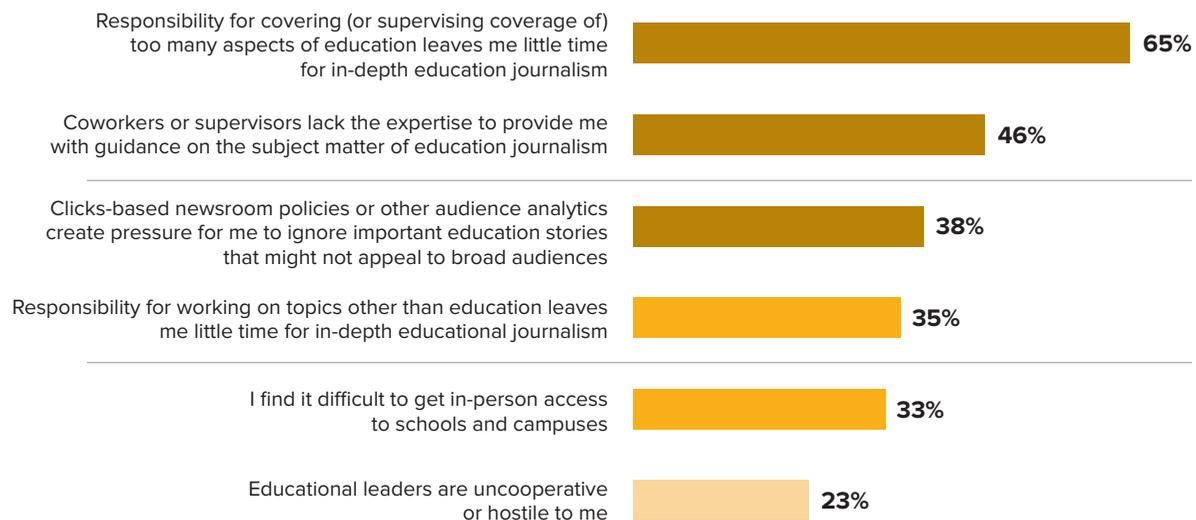


My Journalism Makes a Positive Impact on Education



Leading Challenges Cited by Education Journalists

Even as the overall picture it paints is positive, the study also identifies its share of challenges facing the field.



Is It a Good Time to Start a Job in Education Journalism?

