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Education Writers Association

The Learning Curve: What Every Ed Reporter Should Know

A Message from EWA's Public Editor

The K-12 beat can seem overwhelming when you first start — so many schools, so many districts, so many issues you may never have given much thought. But there are ways to quickly build up your sources and knowledge to develop better news judgment and a more sophisticated approach to your reporting. This guide will help you consider:

- Getting the scoop on local schools
- Understanding education law and policy
- Prioritizing your coverage
- Organizing your reporting
- Staying on top of education news

As EWA's public editor, I'm always available to help, whether you're a member or not, whether you want to talk through strategy or find a source on deadline. Call me at (410) 539-2464 or e-mail lperlstein@ewa.org.

- Linda Perlstein

How Education Works Locally

1. Who are the school board members? Are they elected or appointed? How are they elected? What are their backgrounds?
2. Are teachers unionized, and do they negotiate collective bargaining agreements (contracts)? If so, who is the president of the association? Are other district/school workers unionized?
 - a. Get the collective bargaining contract (if there is one), and read it thoroughly.
 - * Look at pay scales/steps, sick leave/vacation allowances, grievance/grievance appeals procedures, evaluation procedures and what districts/schools must do to fire a teacher.
 - * Check the salary scales. Most school districts give teachers raises based on the number of years they've been teaching and level of education. Some districts have started a "merit pay" program that rewards teachers for students' performance in their classrooms. If your school has one, it's worth investigating. Merit pay is controversial, and a favored reform of the current administration in Washington.
3. Find out how much your district has received in stimulus funds, and try your best to track how that money is spent.
4. Look into expenses. Does the school system spend thousands of dollars on limos for the board members at every meeting, for instance?
5. What are the open meetings/open records laws for your state?
6. Is your district dependent on another local government body (city/county) for local funding, or does it raise local funds via tax levies (ditto for construction/capital improvements)? Are there local funding caps?



7. Find out what parents, business leaders, elected officials, church leaders, students and teachers think of the schools. Ask them what they think the biggest issues are in each school, as well as the good stories that aren't being told.

How Education Works at the State Level

1. Find out how the state funding formula works. Do your school districts think they get a fair share? Several states have been sued for inequitable funding formulas.

2. Read the education laws:

a. Your state's education law is almost certainly online now.

b. Start reading the federal No Child Left Behind law, at www.nclb.gov, or at least the NCLB Desktop Reference.

c. Learn the federal, state and local student privacy laws and procedures.

d. Read the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

e. If possible, meet the state education department PIOs/communications people, and get on their e-mail list.

f. Familiarize yourself with the governor's education agenda and DOE programs that are unique to your state.

3. Does your state have a recommended or required curriculum?

a. How are curriculum decisions made?

b. Does your district set curriculum and pacing at the district level or allow schools to do so?

c. Try to learn as much as possible about the annual state tests and what data educators receive as results and when. Also learn about the district periodic benchmark exams. (These are less secret than state tests but have similar material.)

d. Find the state schools report cards online. The information on these vary state by state. State DOE Web sites also have enrollment reports, dropout reports and other data useful to reporters.

Learning About Your District(s)

1. Find local library books, historians, museums and archivists that can help you understand the history of your district. The news organization's library may also have historic information and special reports.

2. Learn about each school:

a. Its neighborhood, demographics (students and teachers; note changes and trends), the age and condition of the building(s), academic performance, word-of-mouth reputation.

b. How it fits into the district and community as a whole. Get to know the principal and the team leaders for each grade. Also the school nurse, volunteer coordinator (if there is one), PTA officers and receptionist.

3. Request payroll information in spreadsheets or other easily stored format. This information, when collected for a while, can be easily used to do investigative work.



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4. Request a copy of each superintendent contract. Check for perks and benefits (many districts pay their superintendents' social security tax, etc.); often the total compensation is much greater than the listed salary.
5. Find out where district revenue comes from (and how much comes from each source), and how the district spends its money. Pay particular attention to stimulus funds, which the Education Department insists should not be used to continue the status quo, though many systems need the money just to stay afloat.
6. Meet the superintendent, district(s) finance guru, personnel manager, curriculum leader, testing specialist, and school board members.
7. Meet the sheriff/police chief and that department's PIO. Arrests happen at schools and school activities, and the ed reporter sometimes crosses into crime/emergency services reporting.

Covering Your Districts

1. Make a list of all your districts, ordered by size.
 - a. Pick the largest and most important districts to cover consistently
 - b. Look for districts that may be facing changes, dealing with poor achievement, diversity concerns, lawsuits, social upheaval (gang violence, etc.), high dropout rates. Also look to see which district is most/least accessible and open with information.
 - c. Rotate the rest through the process on a schedule.
2. Keep a list of important issues in local schools. Use it to guide coverage.
 - a. Schedule frequent meetings with a variety of people – administrators (school- and district-based), teachers, students and parents.
 - * At the high school level, student leaders and journalists can lead the reporter to other sources. Club and organization officers also are good.
 - * To meet parents, attend school functions; connect with PTAs. For teachers, find out who has high achievement in their classes, or a struggling class, or does innovative things, or advises interesting groups.
 - b. Double-dip during interviews: Once the interviews are over, ask subjects what they're working on, what troubles them, etc.
 - c. Cull all of this info into a document that lists the top 10 issues facing your local classrooms.
 - d. Use the list to guide your news judgment, and give depth and context to your reporting.

How to Cover Board Meetings

1. Read agendas before the meeting.
 - a. You are entitled to a copy of the full meeting packet that board members get each month and all its supporting paperwork, including what's handed out at the meetings, with the exception of the closed-session items. (You are also entitled to parts of those, but they can be redacted—check your local law.)
 - b. Skim the packet cover-to-cover to see if anything in the packet is newsworthy or fodder for feature stories. Aim to write stories on important issues before the meetings.



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c. After you have identified the stories you are going to keep an eye on, call key sources on your campus or system and ask if any issues jump out at them from the agenda.

Private Schools

Meet the principals and other administrators and learn about the school. The same things you want to know about public schools, you want to know about private schools.

Few records are available from private schools, but if they participate in state or national tests, the reporter may be able to access those scores. And the state may require reports from private school that reporters have access to. There likely are 990 forms (nonprofit financial statements) and other public documents available.

Organizing Calendars

1. Build a master calendar for your district(s), listing all the perennial releases, events and reports: Sept. enrollment, testing periods, test results releases, graduations, budget season, elections, etc. Add state and national perennial events and release dates.

2. Build weekly and monthly calendars noting board meetings, school events, reporting assignments, publication dates for stories and other appointments and dates.

3. Add district data and report releases to your calendar.

a. Make sure to get these four: school budgets (spending estimates), audits (actual dollars spent), discipline, and the annual database of staffers, assignments and pay.

b. Track each of these year-to-year in a spreadsheet.

c. Think of some as individual stories: "Campus assaults spike." "The board cuts playground equipment." "The superintendent gets a 20 percent raise." Think of others as supporting data: "It's no wonder they're adding Spanish-language services, with Hispanic students increasing by 30 percent."

4. Start a calendar of state document and information releases.

a. Ask your state education office if it has a list of all reports and data it gathers. (It almost certainly does, so push if someone says it doesn't.) Find out which are important for your readers. Important releases include test scores, enrollment, free- and-reduced lunch counts, school and district reviews, federal accountability reports and district financial reports.

b. When the releases are data, not reports, ask for an electronic "record layout"—the headers that describe each column and row of data. Track data as a spreadsheet, so you have easy access to historical data, each time you write a story. Watch for spikes and trends in the data, which could be breaking news.

Organizing Source Lists

1. Develop a contact list as you get to know your schools.

a. Scour the electronic archives to find out who previous education writers used.

2. Public and private colleges and universities frequently have lists of sources for different fields.

3. Computer programs such as Outlook offer software contact lists, which are useful if you know exactly who you need to talk to but can't recall the phone number or e-mail.

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- a. Program your most used sources into your cell phone and your daily planner.
- b. One method is to compile two quasi-databases of sources:
 - * The first list is of all state and local education contacts. Group them by affiliation (state, district office, school, other agency). Each entry notes the person's title or role, and area of expertise, in addition to contact info. Make notes about their helpfulness.
 - * The second list is of less frequently used contacts. Group them by topic/issue, such as NCLB, dropout prevention/reports, high school reform, teacher education/quality, discipline, etc. Cull sources from listserv conversations, education reports and papers, education journals and newspapers and education blogs and sites.
- c. Create a presence online, on Facebook for example, and use this to connect with students, teachers and parents.

Scheduling School Visits

1. Arrange to walk through each building at least once a year. Try to get into classrooms three or four times a month, minimum. More is better, if possible.
 - a. Schedule half-day school visits as often as possible in which you have no other agenda than letting the principal show you what the school has to offer.
 - b. Request that you get to sit with students at lunch; sit in a class; otherwise, just let yourself be paraded around. Get contact information (phone numbers from the teachers, screen names from the kids, principal's cell number, etc.). This will make it so much easier to report about the school in the future.
 - c. Permission to talk to students, which you will need for students under 18, can be arranged before the interview. School directory info should be available in most places.
 - d. Resources to make sure you know when things are happening:
 - * School web site, school newsletter, student newspapers, PTA newsletter and/or Web site, community calendar.
 - * See if you can join parent and community listserves.

Staying on Top of Edu-News

1. Spend some time each day catching up on the news.
 - a. Read trade magazines, like Education Week, NEA Today and The School Administrator, and, of course, visit ewa.org.
 - b. Subscribe to a news listserv or two (beyond EWA's), such as ASCD (ascd@smartbrief.com) or the Casey Center's (rdavidson@journalismcenter.org).
 - c. Check websites like www.ednews.org, edweek.org and www.eduwonk.com.
 - d. Ask to be added to the press release list for organizations that cover topics that you are interested in.



- e. Check the state education website regularly for superintendents' memos, new reports, etc.
- f. Check in with your PIO/primary contacts regularly or daily if possible.
- g. Call 202-401-1576 to be added to the U.S. Education Department's press release list.
- h. Periodically check the Education Department site, the National Center for Education Statistics, and the Education Resources Information Center, among others.

Organizing Tip for Wiggly Stories

1. For large stories and projects, try building a matrix as you report.
 - a. Start with the initial idea and questions to answer, then list the potential story subjects and sources (local/immediate, expert, etc.).
 - b. Chart your progress as you move through the reporting process, and note when you speak with people and the results of those conversations.
 - c. Note when you read background reports and articles, archived material, official documents (including those obtained via FOIA).
 - d. As soon as possible after completing an interview, transcribe the notes, and note the following: things you need to check, good quotes, possible leads, possible new questions and directions, places more information is needed.

* The matrix helps build the storyboard or story list. As you build the list/ outline/budget, you can mark in the matrix where information goes (source Joe Smith quotes in story 1 and sidebar 1c, etc.), including info that goes into accompanying graphics, infoboxes.

Check court files weekly (Or ask your courts reporter to do this.)

1. Run names through state and federal court computers.
 - a. Worth doing at least once just to see what is there. Districts get sued for odd things. If you find multiple suits, look into how much the district is paying for legal services.
 - b. Periodically check key figures - superintendents, board members, etc.
 - c. Higher education reporters should ask for all investigative audits every six months or so.

- **Marc Dadigan**, former EWA seminar coordinator; **Cathy Grimes**, *Newport News Daily Press*; **David Hunn**, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*; and **Linda Perlstein**, EWA public editor, contributed to this guide.