



Training for Reporters New to the Education Beat

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The Learning Curve: A Practical Guide to Education Reporting

May 2010

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 to. 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.

Get the lay of the land

- Learn the school board members' backgrounds and how they got their seats—are they elected or appointed?
- Familiarize yourself with the teachers' contract. Look at the salary scale, grievance and appeals procedures, evaluation procedures and what districts and schools must do to fire teachers.
- Find out how much your district has received in stimulus funds, and try to track how the money has been spent.
- Learn the relevant open meetings and open records laws and student privacy laws and procedures. Learn the rules about visiting schools. In some states, such as California, reporters can visit any school at any time for any reason; elsewhere there are more restrictions.
- Find out how your district's capital and operating expenses are funded. Is it dependent on city or county funding, or does it raise local funds via tax levies? Are there local funding caps?
- Tap into as many school-level resources as you can. Make sure you read school newspapers and PTA newsletters and sign up for parent listserves, if you can.

Build a calendar

Dozens of education events are prescribed in advance every year. Your first job is just to know which matter to you. Consider adding any or all of these to your calendar:

- Parent advisory organizations for your schools and districts have meetings. Get a list of them and go to some. They'll keep you current on major parent concerns.
- Monthly or bimonthly board meetings let you keep tabs on what matters in the governance of every district in your area. Request that each district send you electronic copies of complete board packets several days before the board meetings. Many also post them online. You can advance the meeting with stories on interesting topics on the agenda, and follow up with updates.
- Periodic state board meetings should address teacher discipline, state payments to local districts, academic accountability for districts, functionary and budgetary

decisions and, often, the approval and closing of charter schools.

- The state compiles and releases much more than just test scores. School districts usually have to report hundreds of data points to the state each year. Ask your state when they expect to report statewide and district-by-district data such as fall enrollment, dropout rates, bank reserves and other financial indicators, test scores and graduation rates.
- The U.S. Department of Education, the National Center for Education Statistics, and the Education Resources Information Center release national reports periodically that may include information from your state. Some of those are yearly releases. Ask which ones, and include them as recurring events.
- The U.S. Department of Education offers grants and programs for local districts. Find out what programs your state and districts have applied for or are held accountable for, and get the important application and decision deadlines.
- Stick a reminder in your calendar to check court files once a week or so. Run district names through state and federal court computers, and periodically check key figures—superintendents, board members—as well.

Build a contact and daily call list

Little is more valuable than sources' cell phone numbers and e-mail addresses. Ask everyone for after-hours contact information.

- Keep current lists of board members. Districts often list them with their personal contact information in board packets after elections. If not, check election files.
- Contact each district's local union representatives. Teachers' unions have full-time leaders who run the unions and representatives in the schools. Secretarial, janitorial and even administrative employees also have unions or associations. They can be good sources.
- Ask for lists and contact information for parent officers in your schools' and districts' parent organizations.
- File a public record request for all district cell phone numbers and assignments.
- Ask teachers and students for cell phone numbers and e-mail addresses. While you should consider how you will use student interviews—what kinds of information need parental approval—you can't use what you don't have.
- Ask local universities for a list of experts and contact numbers for their education-related professors (education law, social services, nutrition, etc.).
- Track changing education laws in your state, and the legislators that sponsor the

bills. They often provide valuable views on stories.

- Call your state department of education, and don't stop at the press office. Ask the spokesperson to put you in touch with the state's expert on the subject. Then get their cell phone numbers, and put them in your contact list.
- Call a few people on your list every day, just to see what they're working on, what they've heard, what worries them and so on.

Request public records

Public records often tell the truth when people won't. And remember that every electronic entry is also a "record." For your public schools, consider requesting:

- Closed or executive session board votes (and sometimes minutes), open after a given period, often 72 hours. Those normally include legal settlements, real estate transactions and personnel matters. The entity will usually not have to release much of what was discussed, only the vote and decision.
- Legal settlements for public bodies, unless closed by a judge. They can reveal who erred in hiring and firing matters, whether students were treated fairly and what kind of dangers employees face, among other things.
- Staff names, assignments, locations, salaries, extra duty pay and other such payroll database fields. Request them yearly as Excel files (or a similar delimited format). They are invaluable for examining teacher and superintendent pay, and for the inevitable moment when a school employee gets picked up by police.
- Past expenditures and revenues. Request 10 years' worth, broken down by state code (so you're always comparing apples-to-apples between districts and years), as Excel files. Like an individual's credit card statements, they will give you an honest view of what really matters to the district.
- District (and state) budgets. Most school-related bodies pass budgets in April or May, but certainly by the end of the fiscal year, June 30. Ask for them by state code, again, so you can compare. Compute the percent change ($\text{New number} - \text{Old number}$, divided by Old number), by year, and over 10 years.
- Major contracts. Superintendent contracts show all the extras—annuity payments, car allowances, bonuses and so on. Vendor contracts are interesting for the work they describe, and the people who get them.
- Student data: Dropouts, graduates, ethnicity, discipline incidents and literally hundreds of other data points are all tallied electronically by districts and reported to states. Ask your districts and state education office for their master lists of all reports and all data gathered.

- Electronic “record layouts.” When the releases are databases, the releasing agency should also have a key, called a “record layout” that describes the headers over each column and row of data. This tells you what’s in the report.
- Backup documentation. Districts also keep written descriptions of many of the individual pieces of data. Fights, attacks and other discipline issues have incident reports. Expense accounts require receipts and sometimes explanations of the purchases. Some must be redacted before they are released, but most are public.
- E-mails, letter and memos. When you’re working on a given topic, think about who will deal with the issue at the district and state level, and ask for correspondence on the issue.

Don’t wait for an event or breaking story to get into schools

- Schedule school visits as often as possible in which you have no other agenda than letting the principal or spokespeople show you what the school has to offer. Let yourself be paraded around. Request to sit with students at lunch.
- Ask your guide to let you sit in a class. Or ask a teacher directly. Once in class, sit in the back, don’t disrupt and stay as long as you can.
- While walking the hallways, look into every door or window you can, to see what’s happening inside classrooms. Take note of the number of students, the kinds of activities, the teacher’s demeanor, the condition of the building and the orderliness of the classroom.
- If a district official is accompanying you on your visit and needs to leave, don’t assume you must also. If the principal showing you around must return to work, say you’d like to stick around for a while.
- Talk to janitors, secretaries and lunchroom workers, as well as administrators and teachers. The stereotype depicting secretaries as knowing everything about a school is often true.
- Get everyone’s cell phone and e-mail numbers. This will make it so much easier to report about the school in the future.
- Don’t forget about your districts’ central offices. Set up chats with the heads of each department, and wander the halls to meet lower-level employees as well.

Familiarize yourself with curriculum and assessment

- How are curriculum decisions made? Does your state have a recommended or required curriculum and grade-level standards? Read them. Does your district set curriculum and pacing at the district level or allow schools to do so?
- 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, and any other tests given at each grade level to monitor student learning. (These are less secret than state tests but have similar material.)

- Find the state's school report cards online, and see how the schools you cover compare.

Keep abreast of national education issues

- Scour trade magazines such as Education Week, NEA Today and The School Administrator, and sign up for e-bulletins from organizations such as ASCD, Public Education Network and EducationNews.org, which link to education stories throughout the country. Get on the e-mail lists of think tanks that analyze issues that interest you.
- Send an e-mail to press@ed.gov or call 202-401-1576 to be added to the U.S. Education Department's press release list. And remember they have subject-matter experts, too.
- Join EWA—it's free—and sign up for the K-12 reporters' listserv, where you can compare what's happening in your district with what's happening around the country. Whether or not you are a member, Linda Perlstein is available to help at no charge. She can talk through story ideas, help you approach the beat, connect you with sources and research or anything else you might need. Contact her anytime at 202-265-0280 or lperlstein@ewa.org.

Issue Brief: The Federal Role in Education

May 2010

No Child Left Behind

Until the last decade, the primary influence of the federal government on schools around the country flowed through funding streams, ensuring that money went to educate previously underserved groups—special education students, poor students—but having little effect on what was taught in America’s schools. Education rhetoric in Washington, D.C., had little effect on classrooms in Washington, N.H.

That changed in January 2002, when the No Child Left Behind Act became law. NCLB, a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) that borrowed elements from the standards-based system of then-president George W. Bush’s native Texas, brought new rules and consequences to educational accountability, an area that previously had nearly been left entirely to states and localities. Its major provisions are as follows:

- **Testing.** Each school must give reading and math tests based on state standards once each year to children in grades 3 through 8, and once in high school. (Science tests are given once in middle and high school, but results are not used in calculating progress.) Pass rates must be broken down by “subgroup”—minority groups, students in poverty or special education, English as a second language students, and so on. States, school systems and schools are determined to have made “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) only if each subgroup achieves the set level of proficiency. States have to gradually increase the percent of students passing the tests; by 2014, the law says, 100 percent of students will have to be proficient in order for schools and school systems to make AYP.
- **Consequences.** Schools that fail to make AYP and that receive federal Title I funds because of a high share of students from low-income families must, depending on how many times they have fallen short, provide tutoring for students, allow them to transfer to higher-scoring schools and engage in several reforms, which could include a new curriculum, new staff or, in extreme cases, takeover by the state or a private company. Schools can receive money when they perform particularly poorly, or well.
- **Teacher quality.** The law requires states to ensure that only “highly qualified” teachers and paraprofessionals are in the classroom. Generally, this is attained by having a major in the subject matter being taught, passing a subject-matter exam and/or proving competency through other measures set by the state.

The bill had strong bipartisan support when it passed Congress and has been credited with forcing schools to better educate students they once might have neglected. But over the years a growing chorus of politicians in Washington have insisted the law is broken. While the law has been due for reauthorization since 2007, that process was put off, as no consensus was clear. President Obama is pressing for a new educational

accountability law. Among the criticisms of No Child Left Behind:

- ***Classroom effects.*** Under intense pressure to achieve passing scores on reading and math, some schools have cut activities, subjects, and skills that aren't tested. Some have narrowed their focus to students just over or under up the proficiency bar ("bubble kids") while, people contend, reducing attention to students certain to pass or fail. There is nothing in the law that explicitly encourages schools to do so; critics, however, say the law has created a climate in which such approaches are inevitable.
- ***Money.*** Many states and localities contended in the past that the requirements of No Child Left Behind—in testing, teacher quality and more—have imposed financial burdens without sufficiently increasing the funding necessary to manage them.
- ***Consistency.*** States decide what's on their tests, how they are graded, what constitutes proficiency and so on. So it's impossible to meaningfully judge results in one state against those in another. And there is little incentive for states to set the proficiency bar high.

President Obama's agenda

When running for president, Barack Obama said he would reform NCLB, though he didn't give details except to say teachers shouldn't spend all year "preparing students to fill in bubbles" and that assessments should be improved. As president, Obama has recently pushed for reauthorization and laid out a blueprint of what the law might look like, although he is not waiting for Congress, pressing for his reform agenda through stimulus funds.

As part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act Of 2009, President Obama gave the Education Department about \$100 billion to distribute to states and school districts. The money was primarily used to forestall teacher firings. The administration warned states to avoid "funding cliffs"—using the funds to finance activities that won't be sustainable once the stimulus money dries up—and to not use the funds to plug budget holes. But tracking the funds and ensuring they were used exactly as intended has proved difficult.

The Education Department reserved \$4.35 billion to be awarded as competitive grants to states that promised specific reforms the administration championed. The rubric gave points for planning to adopt common standards; develop high-quality assessments; open the door to more charter schools; collect and use student-by-student, longitudinal data; develop better evaluation systems that account for student growth; distribute teachers more equitably; adopt turnaround models for the lowest-scoring schools; and demonstrate significant buy-in from stakeholders (including teachers' unions—a sticking point in many states). Tennessee won \$500 million and Delaware \$100 million in the first round of Race to the Top grants. Awards for the remaining Race to the Top money are expected to be announced in the fall.

A new accountability law

In March 2010, Obama sent a “blueprint” for revising ESEA to Congress. The law he envisioned would continue yearly tests, and also:

- Replace the 2014 100 percent proficiency target with one that says that by 2020, all graduates must leave school ready for college and a career. Exactly how this model differs and how it will be measured are unclear. States are encouraged to upgrade their standards, either individually or by adopting voluntary national “common core” standards now being developed.
- Measure individual student growth rather than judging a school by comparing the pass rates of this year’s fourth graders to last year’s fourth graders. Use those value-added measures to determine teacher effectiveness as well, and to evaluate the preparation programs that educate teachers.
- Reward the highest performing schools and force the lowest 5 percent to undergo drastic, prescribed turnaround measures.
- Allow states to consider test scores in areas besides reading and math in schools’ progress measurement, and require them to collect data on college enrollment and success of their graduates.
- Remove the tutoring and school choice provisions of NCLB.

Issue Brief: Standardized Testing

May 2010

With the advent of the standards and accountability movement, especially the passage of No Child Left Behind, thorough coverage of the standardized testing—as both an academic exercise and a multibillion-dollar industry—is now a given for any schools reporter. It’s a complicated subject, and a gold mine of story ideas.

Types of tests

State tests. The most widely reported-on tests are the annual exams given by states in compliance with No Child Left Behind. These tests—in reading, math and recently science—are generally tailored for each state’s standards by one of a few major testing companies, such as Pearson or CTB/McGraw-Hill, in coordination with the state education department. Usually a panel of teachers helps decide which questions a student should know, which is how the state’s “cut score” for proficiency is set. Most states rely on multiple-choice tests. Where written answers are required, they are usually scored by hired graders, who may or may not be educators.

Under No Child Left Behind, the data you see is usually the percent of students scoring “proficient” rather than the actual average scores. Results of state tests are provided for one of two categories, and sometimes both: “criterion-referenced,” which tell how well a student mastered the material, and “norm-referenced,” which tell how he or she compared with peers.

Some states also require students to pass exit exams in order to graduate high school. It is interesting to show samples of these tests, or the standards they are based on, to professors at the local colleges, to judge whether they are aligned with what students will be expected to know there. They often are not.

NAEP tests. The National Assessment of Educational Progress is the closest we come to a national test. The tests, in several subjects, are given to a sample of students around the country, and participation by school systems is voluntary. Pass rates on NAEP are much lower than on state tests. Depending on whom you ask, this is because NAEP is harder, because states set passing thresholds low, because NAEP doesn’t match with state grade-level standards, because teachers don’t know what’s on NAEP and don’t prepare students directly, or other reasons.

Benchmark assessments. Also called formative assessments, these increasingly popular exams are usually administered at the school district level throughout the year to determine where students are at and help teachers guide instruction.

Some issues with testing

Test results. Occasionally mistakes are made by testing companies in creating or scoring tests. There are questions of reliability and consistency in grading when written answers are required. And some educators may cheat. Newspapers have done successful cheating analyses based on data that shows schools faring much greater than expected.

Secrecy. Some states allow the public to see old tests; others only allow a few sample questions to be seen. This is a perpetual problem for reporters, since so much weight is given to a process that nobody really gets to see. It's worthwhile to try to see school system benchmark exams, since they often are facsimiles of what might be expected to appear on the state test.

Pressure and focus. Some say the pressure surrounding testing has become too great, or that schools are making questionable educational decisions in order to focus narrowly on what might show up on state tests. Were the tests to actually cover every standard for each grade, that might not be a problem. But tests are limited in what they cover and in the formats students must answer questions.

Test bias. Critics say some tests favor economically advantaged or white students, mainly because of the cultural references in the questions.

Story ideas

Certainly you will have to write about the state test results each time they are released—including how schools brought their pass rates up, and what might have caused scores to go down. If you wait till the scores come out to find out what local schools that contributed to the strong or weak showings, you'll be working on the fly and printing assertions from administrators that are hard to verify. You should spend some time in schools throughout the year seeing how they prepare students for the test. As the pressure surrounding scores increases, these methods are interesting and sometimes bizarre. What's especially notable is what's happening to schools and students hovering around the proficiency target.

It's important to show how states come up with questions and cut scores, and how test results are and aren't used to make curriculum decisions within schools. How detailed and helpful are the data schools and teachers receive? Are test results used to determine whether students get passed on to the next grade, or how much teachers are paid? Do state tests really cover all the standards for a given subject and grade? Since so much attention is given to NAEP results, it would be worth it to look closely at the administration of the test if and when it happens in your area.

When test data is released

- Study the numbers yourself, directly from the state database. Many districts will release their own set of data that shows you only what they want you to focus on.
- Look for outliers in the data. Are there schools whose pass rates are significantly higher or lower than the district as a whole? Look for schools that perform better or worse than might be predicted given their demographics. Visit these schools and get a sense of what's behind the numbers.
- Extend the time frame. Scores may have jumped from 2009 to 2010, but if they sank even more from 2008 to 2009, that's still a decrease over two years.

- Rather than running lists of schools in order of performance, think of graphics that show interesting trends in the data.
- When you are looking at the percentage of students passing the test, not average scores, writing that “pass rates increased” or “proficiency increased” might be true when “scores increased” is not. Pass rates can actually increase while average scores decrease.
- Whether schools do well or poorly, let readers know what is or is not covered on the test and whether educators feel the results are a fair indicator of achievement.

Issue Brief: Teacher Quality

May 2010

No matter one's opinion on the degree to which students' learning is driven by their own circumstances—innate intelligence, home life, their parents' income and education—there is consensus today that good teachers can make a big difference. You will hear, if you haven't already, that teachers are the greatest in-school factor in student achievement, at least among those factors that have been measured. (The qualifications of “in-school” and “that have been measured” matter; politicians frequently remove them, thus misstating the research, but don't repeat their mistake.) The best new curricula, the best administration and the best funding won't have an impact unless teachers can engage their students.

Historically, teaching has suffered from low status and often attracted students from the lowest rungs of the academic ladder. The Carnegie Foundation's 1996 publication of “What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future” was a clarion call for the need to upgrade the nation's teaching corps. In the years since, policymakers, researchers and educators have been reevaluating everything—how teachers are educated, recruited, compensated, assigned to schools and helped to grow on the job. Even so, there has been limited progress in the quest to assure that all children, especially the most disadvantaged, are consistently exposed to competent, skilled teaching.

Critics charge that the nation's education schools do not prepare teachers adequately, don't attract top academic performers and produce too many graduates in areas such as elementary education and not enough in math and science, special education and English as a second language. New teachers disproportionately still start their careers in the toughest schools, and generally do not get enough support in their first years. Attrition is exacerbating shortages in high-need areas.

Because of the standards and testing movement and No Child Left Behind, policymakers are looking for ways to hold teachers more accountable for their students' learning. They are looking for ways to evaluate and reward teachers based on their skills and knowledge, and how well they help students improve.

Teacher preparation

For at least a generation, there has been a drumbeat of criticism that colleges of education lack rigor, emphasize methodology over content knowledge and don't prepare teachers adequately for the realities of the contemporary classroom. And universities have been accused of using their education schools as cash cows, enrolling many students but then investing their tuitions in more prestigious programs.

No Child Left Behind requires that all classrooms be staffed with “highly qualified” teachers. The law leaves the precise definition of the term up to the states, but in general teachers must have either an academic major or pass a test in the subject they teach.

Over the last decade, many alternative certification programs, run by states, districts or

independent organizations, have allowed people to become teachers without going through the traditional pipeline. The best-known program is Teach for America, which trains college graduates for one summer before placing them in classrooms. TFA has proven popular with elite young college graduates who see teaching in hard-to-staff schools as a two-year service project. But its lasting effect on reshaping the corps of permanent teachers, and on addressing distribution issues, is still to be seen. There is no research consensus on how different types of teacher education contribute to teacher effectiveness, except to say that there is greater variance within each pathway than between pathways.

School assignment

It remains a fact of the profession: The least experienced, least effective teachers most often work in schools with the greatest number of minorities and students in poverty. NCLB gave lip service to fixing this inequity but provided plenty of loopholes as well. Some districts pay bonuses to teach in high-need schools. Groups ranging from anti-union conservatives to grassroots organizers have pushed for changes in a teacher assignment system in which senior teachers get the jobs of their choice while novices are sent to the toughest classrooms.

But so far, this problem endures. Union contracts generally let senior teachers choose their schools rather than giving administrators the right to assign them where they are most needed. And when districts budget by assigning an average salary to each teacher, school-to-school payroll differences are masked. (It is important to note that there is not a neat correlation between teacher experience and ability to improve student performance, after the first few years in the profession.)

Don't just look into teacher quality once teachers are in the classroom. Look into your district's hiring practices. What do or don't central office administrators and principals do during the hiring process to ensure they are hiring the best possible teachers? Does anyone meeting basic qualifications get a slot? If there are more slots than qualified applicants, how is the wheat separated from the chaff—or is it?

Professional development

A 2005 report by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future concluded, "The most persistent norm that stands in the way of 21st century learning is isolated teaching in stand-alone classrooms. Transforming schools into 21st century learning communities means recognizing that teachers must become members of a growing network of shared experience."

Schools and districts have been investing more in systemic programs to train teachers already in the field, provide mentors and ensure they work together inside their schools. At one time, professional development consisted mostly of voluntary workshops that may or may not have been connected to student needs or a district's curriculum. A growing number of districts—though not all, and not in all cases—build professional development into the school day and relate it to a school's or district's educational plan. But still, Pd remains largely a school-level effort. Attempts to tailor training opportunities to the

strengths and weaknesses of each teacher—the kind of differentiation teachers are expected to use with their own students—are few and far between.

Many states require continuing education courses for teachers to maintain their licenses. Some districts turn over professional development time to the companies from which they bought curricular materials. One trend in some districts is peer coaching, in which specially trained teachers travel from classroom to classroom helping their colleagues.

In general, professional development is an undercovered topic in education journalism, given how much time and money it consumes, and how variable the quality is.

Evaluation and merit pay

In most school districts, teacher evaluation is highly regimented and directed by clauses in the teachers' contract. Historically, it has had little to do with whether a teacher's students are learning. Rather, administrators observe a teacher and fill out a form noting whether he or she follows procedures, such as writing a lesson plan, and possesses certain skills, such as the ability to control the class. Nearly every teacher in every district is rated at least satisfactory. And in most places, those evaluations have no effect on compensation; teachers are paid on a scale based solely on how long they have taught and whether they have advanced degrees.

With remarkable speed, support has grown for plans that assess teachers quantitatively. Because of Race to the Top and likely as part of the law that will follow No Child Left Behind, look for states to adopt “value-added” systems in which test scores can be tracked to determine a teacher's effect on student performance, and those quantitative findings will factor significantly—50 percent is what many states are promising in their Race to the Top applications—into decisions about teacher pay and tenure.

In some districts experimenting with value-added and merit pay, higher pay is tied primarily to improvements in student test scores; others rely on a more varied evaluation system that includes portfolio reviews and subjective evaluations. Some reward teachers individually for progress; some make the awards schoolwide. Few states and districts yet have the technology to track all students and teachers consistently, or in all grades and subject areas. There is concern, on both practical and philosophical grounds, that student test scores from year to year are an unrefined and inadequate way to measure teachers' contributions. But that opposition has not slowed the move toward such a reality.

Firing and retiring

Most education reporters wind up, at some point in their careers, writing about a bad teacher who lingered in the system for far too long. It's important to understand what strictures administrators operate under in terms of firing procedures, and whether they use “it's impossible to fire a teacher” as an inaccurate excuse. Understand evaluation, due process and appeals procedures in your district before you need to write a story on the fly. Also learn about what it takes to earn—or deny—tenure, and what tenure means in your district.

Some critics of the quality of the teaching corps point to the incentives teachers have to stay beyond their usefulness. Generally, compensation systems are set up so that teachers must forego higher salaries at the beginning of the career and are rewarded, if they hold out long, by generous pensions. Investigate the pension structure in your district to see what kind of incentives it holds.

Issue Brief: High School Completion and College Readiness

May 2010

For a long time, few people in positions of influence asked many questions about students who left high school before graduating, or students who graduated but did not go on to college. That silence is over. Today, high school completion and college readiness are among the biggest topics in the national conversation on education reform. Research has linked dropping out to many negative outcomes, including lower lifetime earnings, lower life expectancy, a higher dependence on social services and a greater propensity to commit crime. President Obama has set a goal for America to retake its position as first in the world in the share of students who complete at least some higher education; for the goal to be met, students don't just have to graduate in greater numbers, they have to graduate prepared for the next challenge.

At the most basic level, the key questions for reporters to think about regarding high school completion are how many students drop out, why they drop out and what can be done to make sure all students earn a diploma. Beyond that, it is important to look into whether those who do graduate enter some form of higher education or career training and whether they arrive prepared.

Calculating the dropout rate

In recent years, questions have been raised about the methods by which states, schools and districts use to report dropout and graduation rates. Comparisons are difficult because districts and states have used a wide range of formulas to measure how many students graduate in four years. One method is the "cohort" formula, which compares the number of students entering ninth grade with the number graduating four years later. With this method, there is a danger of mislabeling students as dropouts if they do not complete high school within four years. Another common method, the "event" dropout rate, counts the share of students in 9th through 12th grade who actually drop out in a given year.

Jay Greene, of the Manhattan Institute, and Robert Balfanz, of Johns Hopkins University, are among the researchers who have questioned states' reported graduation rates. Their formulas resulted in much lower rates than states had reported. But Balfanz's formula didn't account for special education students, students who take longer than four years to graduate or transfers. In April 2008, then-education secretary Margaret Spellings announced a move by the federal government to ensure that all states use the same "cohort" formula to calculate graduation and dropout rates. The U.S. Department of Education has allowed states to apply for waivers to use extended, or fifth-year, graduation rates in addition to four-year rates to comply with No Child Left Behind reporting requirements.

Reporting tips

Find out who your state, districts and schools consider a dropout and how they calculate dropout and graduation rates. Methods should be described in state and local laws and policies. Be aware that your state may publish more than one graduation rate, using one

that focuses on the four-year graduation rate and another that includes fifth-year graduates and students who earn alternate diplomas (such as special education diplomas), or one for the state's own purposes and one that complies with NCLB requirements. Are your schools and districts reporting estimated dropout rates, or working with actual population figures?

Find out what other completion data your state publishes. States, districts and schools should also have information on students earning certificates of completion, special or modified diplomas and GEDs. This information should be available annually. Ask for the data that go into the formulas, then plug that into other formulas. If necessary, sit down with a source who can explain how it works.

Data minefields

Certain student subpopulations can skew dropout rates. These include overage students, homeless students, immigrants, special education students, migrant students, those returning from the justice system, those reentering school after dropping out and students who fail core classes.

- Schools with high levels of student turnover, especially those in urban areas, near military installations or in agricultural areas, bear scrutiny, as do districts with high numbers of homeless students.
- If your data don't include unique state ID numbers for students, migrant students could be counted as dropouts multiple times. Likewise, a student who leaves one high school but goes on to graduate elsewhere might also be considered a dropout by the former school.
- A student who leaves high school but earns a GED may be considered a dropout in some formulas and a completer in others. Do your data include all people in a district over age 18 who have not earned a diploma or equivalent, or the population of students who leave school during a specific period (and is that period one year, four years or more)?

School culture and interventions

Students who have many absences, have been held back a grade or more or have failed classes are more likely to drop out. The transition from middle to high school is a particular pain point for at-risk students; waiting till students are juniors. In surveys, students say they dropped out because of a lack of credits, the size of their schools and classes, home factors and a lack of connections with their school and faculty. Several districts have "dropout recovery" programs designed to bring dropouts back into the system and help them earn accelerated credits toward diplomas with flexible schedules and individualized attention. Districts also may have GED tutoring and testing available. Be alert for faculty and staff who may be funneling to alternative programs students who could graduate with support and remediation.

- Look into how the district, and the state, track students as they move through school systems. What are districts doing to keep students in school? What are districts doing to retrieve dropouts?
- Look closely at alternative education options for at-risk students. How are they structured? Who teaches the courses, and are they rigorous? What types of colleges and businesses admit or hire these students?
- The best sources on high school completion are the dropouts, or former dropouts, themselves. Most high school students, directors of alternative education programs and community colleges know dropouts—as do teenagers currently in school. Find out why students drop out, and for those who have reentered education, what brought them back.

College and career readiness

The Obama administration has vowed to reform the current accountability system with one that requires the adoption of “college- and career-ready standards.” How can you evaluate college readiness? Achieve Inc. keeps track of states that currently have such standards and tests aligned to those standards, yet those states still have many students who arrive at college—if they get to college—and test into remedial English and math. Data on college remediation, especially when tied to high school grades and test results, can be powerful in showing whether students are prepared for higher education. Reporters have had success in gathering such data from public universities and community colleges. As well, reporting on the ground about whether or not there is a relationship between what’s expected of students at local colleges and what students are taught in the K-12 system can be valuable.

Issue Brief: Charter Schools and School Choice

May 2010

For decades, American families had two choices in schooling: the public school down the street or the parish school at their church. Now there are charter schools, district “pilot” and magnet schools, virtual schools, independent private schools, mission-driven religious schools and, in some cases, vouchers to help families pay for private schooling.

In particular, alternatives for public school students have boomed over the past two decades, as families and lawmakers fled troubled city school districts. Leaders in several states have tried to pass laws that would allow families to use taxpayer dollars as private school tuition vouchers. Many have hit either political or legal roadblocks. Programs endure in Ohio (14,000 students) and Milwaukee (20,000 students, about one-sixth of the city’s school population). The student bodies of many private schools in Milwaukee are made up nearly entirely of voucher students. Some states offer a politically more palatable tuition tax credit, which allow tax credits to either families or donors in exchange for tuition payments.

Vouchers no longer get much attention. The momentum in the choice movement today is toward charter schools: tuition-free public schools that are run free of most of the bureaucratic strictures of school districts. The first charter opened in Minnesota less than two decades ago. Now nearly 5,000 charters in 40 states teach more than 1.6 million students—double the number of just five years ago. Three to four hundred new charters open each year across the country. Now that President Obama, through Race to the Top school reform grants, has called for states to lift caps on charter school growth, the expansion is apt to continue.

The idea behind charters is for educators to provide a different academic model in exchange for academic improvement. Some have a specific focus like the arts, but many are back-to-basics schools with smaller class sizes, uniforms and a rigid academic program. They typically have boards of directors whose meetings should be open to the press and the public. Charters must be authorized, and rules governing authorization vary state by state. In some cases, for example, a university can oversee a charter; in others, that would be prohibited.

Some public school districts, seeking to keep students from leaving for charters, have invited families to choose any of their schools in a system known as “open enrollment.” And others have attempted to take a page from the charter model: Boston, Los Angeles and St. Louis are now experimenting with “pilot” schools that have more independence and authority over academics, school hours and staff hiring.

Growth and performance

Keep track of enrollment growth within existing schools, as well as growth to come from new schools, and the effects of that growth on public school districts. Charter schools do not always provide public information, such as enrollment numbers, willingly. But states maintain detailed enrollment data and other information about charters, although it’s

often a year or more out of date. Compare the numbers of special education and English language learner students with other schools in your district; if there is a discrepancy, find out why. Do the charters offer the same types of special services the other schools do? Do they encourage all types of students to apply? Do students with previous special ed or ELL designations enroll in charters that choose not to identify the students as such?

Charter school students must take the same annual state standardized tests as other public school students. For existing schools, track tests scores and watch for rising or falling trends. And read accountability reports that charter school sponsors and evaluation teams file with states.

Develop relationships with your state charter school association and school choice advocates. They often have a big-picture perspective on activities and growth. National organizations, such as the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, often publish “best practice” information regarding school oversight and accountability programs. Read research reporters on charters, keeping in mind that they are studying different groups of schools using different methodologies. To the question “Do charters work?” there is no single black-and-white answer, no matter what proponents and opponents insist. The reality is as complex as the schools are varied.

Charter chains

Some charter schools are one-hit efforts by grassroots organizers; others are part of local or national chains. The chains are getting lots of attention these days, particularly those considered “high-performing,” such as the Knowledge Is Power Program, Green Dot and Achievement First. They rely on a certain type of aggressive, data-driven leader; teachers (often young and trained in alternative programs) who work long hours; and an intense culture that instills the expectation, from day one, that all students will go to college. Many of the people behind the movement to expand charters—the financiers, the policymakers, the think tanks—are really just promoting that kind of charter, not the mom-and-pop charter aimed at simply providing a distinctive focus, such as arts or business. Chain schools are run with certain methods and philosophies that permeate the company and are as careful about their message as (or more so than) school districts, which can make access difficult. But you should approach coverage of charters as you would any other school in your area.

Private and charter financials

Charters receive per-pupil funding as traditional schools do, but in most cities must acquire their own real estate—at times a substantial hurdle. The most prominent charter chains receive a lot of philanthropic funding, so per-pupil funding may not equal per-pupil spending. Look into how charters in your district are funded beyond public streams, and try to find out how their money is spent. Because they are public schools, be aggressive about insisting on the same kind of data from charters as you receive from traditional schools.

Private schools, on the other hand, don’t have to tell you if their enrollments are up or down, or what happens with test scores. But you’ll at least get a hint about enrollment in

their yearly financial reports. They'll tell you how much money the school gets in donations, how much in tuition, and how much from other sources, like endowments. The annual reports are created for donors each year, and usually given out freely. If they are nonprofits—and most are—they also must file annual reports with the state and IRS Form 990, and those are public information. Those might provide a window into how the school is spending money in a less polished manner.

Issue Brief: Special Education

May 2010

There has never been a larger share of students identified with disabilities in U.S. public schools as there was in the past decade. Disabilities range widely, from low-level needs such as speech therapy to complex, intense conditions such as severe autism and mental retardation. Public schools today are responsible for educating children who generations ago may have been institutionalized, or may not have even survived.

States and districts were left scrambling to pay the \$77 billion annual cost of special education students—almost double the per-pupil price tag of mainstream students. The federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, enacted in 1975, mandates that school districts provide “free, appropriate public education” for children with disabilities. When parents feel the districts fall short, they instigate state hearings and even lawsuits, pressing for more services. Districts fight back, saying their teachers are effective. And advocacy groups argue minorities are overrepresented in special education. All of this plays out locally, student by student, school by school.

As a consequence, districts have begun pushing to limit those needing special education services, and federal and state agencies watch to ensure minorities and other groups are not pushed into special education at a rate disproportionate to their share of the student population. The results have led to a marked decrease in special education students over the last few years. Three decades ago, federal programs supported 3.6 million disabled students ages 3 to 21. In 2006, that number had risen to 6.7 million, or 8.5 percent of Americans in that age group. In 2008, numbers had dipped slightly to 6.6 million students, or just 8.3 percent.

Special ed students in the classroom

One of the biggest issues in special ed is whether students are taught on their own or “mainstreamed” or “included” in regular classrooms. At the furthest extreme, some students are in work environments, like warehouses or skilled labor facilities, learning life skills, or in schools devoted to students with severe disabilities. Or they may be taught in separate special education classrooms in regular schools. These are interesting to explore primarily to see how teachers do, or don’t, address the wide range of needs among a group of students and how they manage to keep up with a school’s regular curriculum, if they are required to do so.

Many students today—particularly those with less severe disabilities—spend most of their time in regular classrooms, where additional teachers or aides help them adapt. Because most disabled students are expected to take the regular grade-level state standardized tests, they often are taught the regular curriculum. Sometimes it only takes some modifications for students with learning disabilities to be able to keep up; other students, though, might be better-served with a curriculum that meets them at the level they are at. Ask teachers what mix they have in their classrooms, whether they feel special education students are getting exactly the education they need and whether the tests they take accurately measure their skills.

Where public schools are found unable to meet special ed students' needs, the students are sent at the school district's expense to private schools specializing in certain disabilities. Watch enrollment numbers, but take the next step and find out *where* students are learning. Then visit those classes if possible. See what makes them unique or mundane, effective or not.

Individual student stories

Usually when a parent complains about a student's district or teacher, the argument will center around the student's Individualized Education Program, or plan, updated at least once a year by the IEP team—which can include teachers, counselors, psychologists and parents. The IEP is a blueprint that guides each student's learning, not just in academics but often in behavior and emotional support. Years of one student's IEPs will give a precise history of how he should have been taught and how he did in class.

When parents don't agree with a district's IEP for their child, they can appeal to their district, then their state. If they still don't like the results, they can sue. Check court records and state listings regularly. Ask your state where they publish results of the hearings. They'll be redacted but still useful. Find out how much your district spends contesting and settling these lawsuits.

School systems are more private and cautious regarding special education than with perhaps any other issue. In some cases this makes it hard for reporters even to see special education in action. When schools have the permission of parents, this secrecy can loosen a bit. Parents alone can release documents such as IEPs, so they are almost always a key to reporting. And they usually know well what's going on among other special ed parents. There may be no better organized group of parents and advocates than those with special ed students.

Test scores

Under No Child Left Behind, districts and schools must show that their special ed students achieve the same pass-rate targets on state tests that other students do. When schools do not make adequate yearly progress under the law, one of the two subgroups that most often contributes to the shortcoming is special education students. (The other is English language learners.) The most severely disabled students can take alternative assessments, such as graded work portfolios. There is some controversy about whether those tests should focus on reading and math, as policy requires, or on the basic skills some of those students spend their time learning in school.

See how schools prepare special education students for the state assessment, get a sense of whether what they are learning for the test matches what they should be learning developmentally, and track scores by school and district. The U.S. Department of Education publishes an annual report to Congress that will help you put local scores into context.

Issue Brief: English Language Learners

March 2010

States and schools are tracking the progress of non-native English speakers more closely than ever before, thanks in part to No Child Left Behind. These students are often called English language learners (ELL); other terms include limited English proficient (LEP), English as a second language (ESL) and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). Whatever you call these students, their population is booming. American public schools enrolled 5 million in 2006, a 57 percent increase over 10 years. Now one U.S. student in 10 is an English language learner. And they're no longer isolated to California, Florida and the Southwest. For example, ELL enrollments are increasing quickly in South Carolina, Kentucky and Indiana. Schools with emerging immigrant populations are having trouble meeting the need.

Enrollment data

Tracking ELLs shows new sprouts of ethnicity before they bloom. Think of this: Hundreds of languages are spoken in U.S. schools. One of every four elementary ELLs is an immigrant; two of five secondary students are. This means stories not just about academics but also culture. Your districts and state keep enrollment numbers, and the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition is one of the best national references.

Assessments

ELLs take an ELL-specific English test to assess their competency in the language. They also usually take the general state test. Some states give these tests in students' native languages or modify them to make the English easier, but most do not. There is concern that the tests, therefore, are not assessing reading and math ability, as they are supposed to, but rather how proficient a child is in English. Schools must prove to the feds that their ELLs are making progress in both the state content tests and the English competency exams.

Quality of instruction

Federal law requires an ELL-certified teacher in an ELL classroom. And most states have standards that govern the maximum student load per teacher. But it can be hard to find enough certified ELL teachers. Some districts skimp by rotating a few to several different classrooms each day. Ask for a list of teachers, assignments and certifications from your state or district. Compare it to the total number of ELL students in the school.

There is no consensus on the "right" way to teach English language learners. It can be politically unpopular to teach immigrants in their own language, and some states and districts have limited or banned such instruction in favor of English immersion programs. Dual-language programs are popular in some places. In these classrooms, students learn academic subjects both in English and a foreign language—the idea being that they learn content as they learn the new language.

Every state has different standards for enrolling, testing, teaching and moving ELLs into

mainstream classes. The quality of ELL teaching varies greatly by district and even classroom. Sit in the back of classrooms and watch. Sometimes ELLs are taught in separate classrooms all day; sometimes they are pulled out for special services only, occasionally. They may be expected to follow the same curriculum as everyone else, or they may receive a special curriculum. These differences can be a matter of controversy worth investigating. But in every case, the teacher should be able to tell you which students are at what ELL levels, and how she adapts instruction so they learn science, math, history *and* English.

Schools struggle to engage parents who don't speak English, and those parents struggle to help their children academically. Seek parent contacts through ELL teachers, the school's or school system's community liaison (if it has one), local advocacy groups and the students themselves.