

CENTER FOR COOPERATIVE MEDIA

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

# THE JOURNALISM PIPELINE



AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE STATE OF JOURNALISM  
IN NEW JERSEY PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS

TARA GEORGE

SPRING 2020



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[www.centerforcooperativemedia.org](http://www.centerforcooperativemedia.org)



## About the Center for Cooperative Media

The Center for Cooperative Media is a grant-funded program based at the School of Communication and Media at Montclair State University. Its mission is to grow and strengthen local journalism, which it does through professional development and training, networking, coaching for entrepreneurial and independent news organizations, research, events and by coordinating and advocating for editorial and business collaborations.

The Center for Cooperative Media's flagship program is the NJ News Commons, which is a network of more than 280 publishers and dozens of freelancers in the state of New Jersey, and the NJ College News Commons. The Center's focus within the NJ News Commons is to grow and strengthen New Jersey's local news and information ecosystem for the benefit of residents. The Center has regular and project-based partnerships with several organizations whose work complements our own, such as the Local Independent Online News Publishers, the Institute for Nonprofit News, the Center for Investigative Reporting, Solutions Journalism Network, Free Press and many others, as well as major platforms, including Facebook and Google.

Nationally, the Center studies collaborative journalism.

The Center's work is supported by operational funding from Montclair State University, Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Democracy Fund, the New Jersey Local News Lab Fund of the Community Foundation of New Jersey and the Abrams Foundation.

To learn more about the Center and its work, visit [www.centerforcooperativemedia.org](http://www.centerforcooperativemedia.org).



## About the author

Professor Tara George is the head of Journalism and Television/Digital Media at the School of Communication and Media at Montclair State University in New Jersey. Her scholarship focuses on issues in community journalism, particularly at the local, collegiate and scholastic levels.

She has worked as a journalist in Singapore, London, New York and New Jersey, and is a former staff writer for the New York Daily News. Her more recent work has been published in The New York Times, Nieman Lab, Poynter Online, MediaShift, New Jersey Monthly Magazine and aired on NJTV.

Prof. George teaches undergraduate journalism classes and serves as faculty adviser to The Montclarion, the award-winning independent student newspaper of Montclair State.

In 2016 she was honored with an award for Professing Excellence at Montclair State. She holds a BA from Cambridge University and a Master's from the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.



# Executive summary

Despite widespread concern about the decline of newspapers and the internet-driven transformation of professional journalism, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the effect of these developments on the teaching of journalism in high schools, where teenagers can get their first formative experiences of reporting and an introduction to news literacy.

That lack of research at the high school level was a key reason the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University decided to study the prevalence of journalism education in New Jersey's public high schools and the journalism they are (or are not) producing. This work is part of the Center's ongoing research into local news ecosystems in New Jersey and its mission to support journalism in the state. It is the Center's hope that this work will be replicated in other U.S. states.

The research endeavored to answer a series of critical questions: What opportunities do students in New Jersey public high schools have to take journalism classes or participate in a school newspaper? Has the evolving nature of storytelling had any impact on teaching multimedia skills to teenagers? Are public high school students interested in producing journalism? What trends, if any, are shaping the nature of journalism pedagogy for New Jersey teens and their teachers.

The findings were clear, if nuanced. New Jersey has a vastly uneven landscape of journalism education and opportunities at public high schools, shaped by resources, personalities, bureaucracy and competitive pressures on students.

Unlike such subjects as math or language arts, which are mandatory, New Jersey high schools don't have to offer journalism. The state's decentralized education system gives a lot of latitude to school districts to control curriculum, which means that the existence of journalism in a school largely depends on the will of a principal or administrator, or the motivation of a teacher.

A single newspaper adviser with the training and drive to support a strong student publication can have a transformative effect on a school's journalism offerings. Consequently, there are schools where journalism instruction is impressive, established and secure. However, there are other schools where newspaper adviser turnover is high, and class instruction is uneven. And still others where no journalism exists at all.

Where there is journalism instruction, it is not happening in a vacuum. Newspaper advisers and their students are pushing to adopt multimedia skills, albeit at a varied pace. The barriers to entry lie predominantly in budget and access to technology, although advisers are often eager to seek out professional development opportunities to learn the skills they need to support digital platforms for their publications.

Optimistically, the high school newspaper advisers surveyed here are not reporting widespread decline in student interest in taking journalism classes as a reaction to changes in the professional sphere. However, in the schools where journalism is offered, many advisers report that the rising pressure on students to appear competitive in their college applications by taking Advanced Placement (AP) college level classes is having a negative effect on journalism instruction because students are increasingly overscheduled and are disincentivized from taking journalism because it is not offered at the AP level.

# Introduction

For decades, the high school newspaper has been an invaluable tool for teaching teenagers basic news literacy and allowing them to discover firsthand the central role journalism can play in a community. Notable journalists have been propelled into the profession by their teenage experiences in news publishing. Walter Cronkite served as editor of the *Campus Cub* at San Jacinto High School in Houston, Texas, before going on to become anchorman at the CBS Evening News and “the most trusted man in America.” Carl Bernstein worked as circulation and exchange manager for the *Silver Chips* newspaper in Montgomery Blair High School in Silver Spring, Maryland, before ascending to *The Washington Post*, where he and Bob Woodward broke one of the biggest stories in American journalism, the Watergate scandal. Elizabeth Bumiller now occupies one of the most influential positions in media as the White House bureau chief for *The New York Times*, having made her start in journalism as a young reporter for *The Walnut Hills Chatterbox* in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Research has demonstrated that as well as initiating journalism careers, involvement in high school news gathering can have significant academic value. Palmer et al. showed that middle and high school students improved in reading and writing as a result of newspaper-based instruction. Blinn found stronger expository writing abilities among students who had experienced journalism education at high school, attributing it to the writing and editing process giving students a higher proficiency with word usage, spelling and punctuation than non-journalism students. Dvorak and Choi went further, establishing a correlation between participation in journalism education at high school and performance on the ACT standardized tests and college course/tests. They concluded that high school newspaper involvement “is an excellent outlet for talented, active and involved high school students. It gives them a chance to apply their natural leadership abilities while also exercising their critical thinking and writing skills.”

Other observers have argued that high school journalism programs are not just beneficial as incubators of young journalistic talent or as facilitators of academic development, but also serve as a critical form of civics education at a time when there is widespread concern about the low political involvement of young people. Clark and Monserrate argue that “participation in high school journalism is one avenue that affords young people a sense of a collective and shared public culture.” They noted that working on a high school newspaper encouraged students to develop away from focusing on their individual selves and introduced them to the value of empathizing and identifying with others in their community, standing up for others’ rights, and connecting to their larger community.

Much of this important scholarship establishing the valuable role of journalism education in the high school curriculum was conducted decades ago when there seemed to be a need to justify journalism as a legitimate form of academic study. Scholars have more recently turned their attention to understanding if journalism education at the high school level has been transformed

by the same forces that are transforming journalism at the professional level. In other words, has journalism education felt the impact of the rise of the internet; the disappearance of “legacy” forms of media, such as newspapers; the digitization of news; and the widespread use of smartphones and social media platforms?

In 2011 the Center for Scholastic Journalism at Kent State University undertook an ambitious national Scholastic Journalism Census in high schools, using a random sample of over 4,000 public high schools across the nation to understand the prevalence of student newspapers, yearbooks, television and radio programs and websites. They used a national database to mail surveys to principals and concluded that student media remained robust in public high schools in general, but that schools that were smaller, poorer or had higher minority populations were more likely to have no student media. Authors of that study say work is being done to update that survey, which was the first of its kind after student media began to move online.

More recently, in December 2018, the Education Week Research Center conducted a survey in collaboration with the Journalism Education Association (JEA) of nearly 500 K-12 journalism educators across the country to evaluate the status of journalism education in their programs. Specifically, they sought feedback from high school newspaper advisers on the impact of criticism from President Donald Trump, who they noted had denounced “the fake news media” and declared journalists “the enemy of the people.” They also explored other fundamental aspects of journalism education in high schools: student interest in journalism, issues of censorship and press freedom, and student trust and confidence in the media.

Their findings provide valuable insight into the issues facing journalism educators on the national level and echo in some regards the conclusions of this study, namely that despite the tumult that bedevils professional journalists, high school journalism has remained remarkably undamaged. Their survey saw a slight increase in student interest in journalism and no real change in student opinions on the reputation of the news media. It also found that rather than undermining interest in high school journalism, President Trump’s attacks on the media had actually stimulated interest in journalism among teenagers. Interestingly, the study noted that the major threat advisers saw to their programs was increased pressure on students to take Advanced Placement courses and the overscheduled nature of high school students’ lives.

Our study had a similar point of departure: a concern about how high school journalism was faring in the digital age, but we looked specifically at journalism education in the state of New Jersey. Our line of inquiry sought to gauge how widespread the exposure to journalism is in high schools in the state, to measure student interest in participating in the school newspaper, and to learn the issues journalism educators face particularly in light of the technological changes that have swept the industry.



# Data and methodology

The data in this report are taken from a number of sources. In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with high school newspaper advisers attending two conferences in 2019 organized by the Garden State Scholastic Press Association (GSSPA), the main association for scholastic newspaper advisers in the state. Interviewees were asked questions about the nature of the student news organizations they oversee, what issues they face as advisers and general observations they had about the state of high school journalism. Their responses provided a starting point for the framing of this study, confirming the need for a systematic analysis of the opportunities for journalism education that teenagers were exposed to in the state.

Therefore, we conducted an online survey to capture information about trends in high school journalism from a sample that included schools that have journalism programs as well as those that do not. This survey was sent out via email using mailing lists of journalism advisers provided by the GSSPA. To attempt to capture data from schools that don't have journalism programs, we also sent out the survey to a list of all high school principals that we acquired from the NJ DOE, and a list of English-language supervisors. Despite repeated attempts, the response rate was low; however, we considered the 96 responses to constitute a fairly representative convenience sample of the 436 high schools in the state in 2018/19.<sup>1</sup>

Respondents were guaranteed anonymity, and they were informed that the results of the survey would be published as part of this report. The questions on the survey were designed to glean information about the form in which journalism was taught to students – whether through journalism classes, or through an extracurricular club, or a combination of both. Additionally, respondents were asked for information about the structure of student newspapers at schools, whether they were multiplatform, who the adviser was, whether that person was compensated with a stipend, if that person had journalism training, if the adviser had tenure, how long the newspaper had been in operation and if the respondent was aware of any attempts by school administrators to censor or stifle content. Subsequent questions sought to gauge student interest in participating in journalism: whether there was a rise or decline in participation, and what factors could be identified as causing an increase or a decrease in student participation. Lastly, respondents were asked if they would be willing to be contacted for further discussion and if so, to submit contact names and email addresses for use only for outreach.

A third source of data came from an Open Public Records Act (OPRA) request submitted to the New Jersey Department of Education (DOE) in the summer of 2019, seeking a list of all high schools that offered journalism classes. The records custodian was able to provide the most recent data available, which was for the 2017/18 academic year and, to facilitate comparison, data from five years earlier, which was for the 2012/13 school year. These lists show what, if

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<sup>1</sup> The number of high schools in the state changes from year to year and schools are dissolved and others created. This number does not include special services schools or alternative schools.

any, journalism courses are offered in the high schools in the state. The DOE does not keep lists or data on which high schools have student newspapers.

A fourth source of data came from the detailed School Performance Reports issued by the DOE for each school in the state and available online. These reports contain demographic data on the high schools, including the racial makeup of the schools, the percentage of students considered to be economically disadvantaged, and the size of the student body. The reports also contain measures of academic achievement, college and career readiness and a narrative outlining the mission of each school and its strengths.

A final layer of qualitative data was achieved through interviews with leaders from the GSSPA, the national Journalism Education Association, and educators and administrators in New Jersey.

The data from these combined sources provided rich and nuanced information about schools that had some degree of commitment to journalism already.

Where our data was not strong was concerning the schools that do not have journalism education. Educators from those schools typically did not respond to our survey, perhaps believing they had nothing to contribute. The data we gathered from the DOE and the School Performance Reports about those schools were not sufficient to provide an explanation for why students at those schools were not exposed to journalism, either in classes or through an extracurricular school newspaper.

Ad hoc attempts were made to reach out to educators and administrators and students at schools listed as not having journalism, in an attempt to gather some qualitative data for this aspect of the study. A number declined to comment, with the exception of one educator who agreed to be interviewed over the phone on the condition of anonymity. A student from that same school was interviewed in person and later by phone.

It should also be noted that the focus of this study was newspaper and multiplatform journalism and did not extend to journalism being done at New Jersey high schools as part of television production and radio programs. While print and multiplatform journalism in New Jersey tends to fall under the auspices of the English departments, television production is often organized differently and often has a focus on entertainment and events coverage, although there are high schools that have strong television and radio news operations. Similarly, the scope of this study did not include student participation in yearbook production, although there is much overlap in terms of skills.

## Key findings: state level

There is wide variation in the teaching of journalism from one New Jersey high school to another. The state's education system is highly decentralized, with the power to set curriculum apportioned at the district level. Unlike math or English language, districts aren't required to offer journalism classes nor must they support student newspapers. Journalism, when it is taught, can be housed within the curriculum, fall into an extracurricular newspaper club, or exist in some combination of both.

"It's a hodge podge," said Sue Everett, a leader of the GSSPA who has spent decades involved in New Jersey high school journalism, during one of a handful of in-person discussions and telephone interviews conducted during 2019. "There are strong newspaper programs. There are schools with websites. Some put a pdf of the print edition online. There are schools with no journalism instruction at all. We don't really know how many there are."

There is no accurate count of the number of high schools in the state that have newspapers. The DOE keeps no lists and has no data on which of the 443 high schools in the state in 2018 had news publications. Nor does the GSSPA have an accurate and up-to-date count of the number of high school papers in the state. This is due to the high turnover of newspaper advisers, the GSSPA's dependence on advisers electing to participate in the group (not all do), and the organization's lack of resources required to establish and maintain an accurate list.

This is not unique to New Jersey. According to Kelly Glasscock, the executive director of the Journalism Education Association, most states struggle to produce accurate counts of their high school news organizations and his group has no national tally. "A question I often get is, 'How many newspapers are there?'" Glasscock said in a telephone interview. "We don't have that data. We don't have the resources ourselves but we want to spur that kind of research."

The OPRA request submitted to the New Jersey DOE as part of this study did yield valuable data on which high schools in New Jersey offer journalism as a class. It should be noted that these results are not an accurate measure of the total number of schools where students can get journalism instruction, because there are schools that do not offer journalism classes but do have a student newspaper as part of a club. Nevertheless, the data does give an indication of which schools provide journalism instruction in their curriculums.

For academic year 2017/18, the most recent year with available data, 201 of the 443 high schools listed (45%) had journalism classes on offer in the school curriculum. By comparison, five years earlier, in academic year 2012/13, the total number of schools that offered journalism classes was 216 out of 423 schools (51%). While these numbers suggest a slight decline in the total number of high schools offering journalism classes, a closer analysis reveals fluctuations at individual schools from one year to the next. Schools that were offering journalism in 2012/13

were not necessarily the same schools that were offering journalism classes five years later during the 2017/18 academic year. Some stopped teaching journalism, and others that had not offered it before found ways to incorporate it into their curriculum. One hundred sixty-seven schools offered journalism classes in *both* academic years.

### New Jersey high schools with and without journalism classes (2012-13 vs. 2017-18)



#### Academic Year 2012/13:

Schools with journalism classes – 216 (51%)

Schools without journalism classes – 207 (49%)

Total schools – 423

#### Academic Year 2017/18 (most recent data available):

Schools with journalism classes – 201 (45%)

Schools without journalism classes – 242 (55%)

Total schools – 443

**Number of the same high schools offering journalism classes during both academic years – 167**

These changing numbers are consistent with the narrative that emerged from interviews with the administrators who interact with high school journalism. In New Jersey public high schools, the existence of journalism is often dependent on the presence of individual stakeholders in the schools, such as an English language supervisor, a principal or a single committed teacher. Consequently, journalism electives come and go, as do the journalism clubs and the high school papers; a longstanding newspaper can cease publishing if an adviser leaves or retires. In

addition, low enrollment can force administrators to cancel a journalism class. Similarly, low student interest can force the elimination of a club.

Equally, the arrival in school of a new administrator with a pro-journalism perspective or a new teacher with multimedia skills can revive interest in the student news organization, sometimes pushing the paper to go digital, introduce video and forge ahead with multiplatform storytelling. Budget changes, district commitment and teacher interest were all cited by interviewees as reasons why journalism programs might thrive or die out.

Student interest is also an influential factor. As for the central question of whether teenagers see value in engaging in journalism anymore, the response was mixed. A third (34%) of respondents to the survey said they detected an increase in interest in journalism among students, a quarter (26%) saw a decrease, and 40% saw neither an increase or a decrease. While this is only an approximation based on what our survey respondents perceived, what seems clear is that student willingness to learn reporting – or the lack of it – can be heavily influenced by the kind of opportunities that exist in the school they attend.

## Support at the institutional level

In some schools, administrators are the primary advocates of journalism programs, building four years of journalism classes that meet the state's Student Learning Standards for the 21st Century. These standards were created in 1996 to provide guidance to local New Jersey school districts and essentially list the knowledge and skills students should have acquired by the time they graduate high school. Journalism falls into the Life and Careers category, and the district administrators who have implemented journalism programs have found that the study and practice of news gathering correlates with a raft of learning outcomes, including civics, media fluency, leadership, global understanding, teamwork, creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, ethics, writing and technological savvy.

In schools displaying a systematic approach to journalism pedagogy, the curriculums are detailed and thoughtfully constructed, skills are sequenced and the learning about journalism reaches back into history, covers law and ethics, and stretches into the future of the field. This lesson-based instruction is complemented with hands-on learning at a student newspaper.

At one school we looked at in depth, there are four levels of journalism classes that begin at ninth grade and build all the way up to a sophisticated course for twelfth graders. There's a newspaper too, and, serious thought has been given to the interplay between practice and theory.

## Detailed Look: High School A - Support at the Institutional Level

The institutional support for journalism at High School A is enviable. The curriculum is detailed and thoughtful, giving students a combination of applied skills that allow them the hands-on experience of making media as well as the value of critically thinking about it. At High School A, 91% of students go on to two- or four-year colleges and it has been consistently recognized as a top school in the county and state.

In Journalism 1, a one-semester course, students get exposure to the fundamentals of journalism through participation in monthly production of the school newspaper. They touch on history, and ethics and law (including *Hazelwood*, the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case that dictates the limits of the First Amendment rights of student journalists).

Journalism 2, 3 and 4 build on this foundation and allow students to work on and publish the paper. All three are full-year classes and 3 and 4 meet at the same time. The course is set up to give students the experience of working in a newsroom and managing a team. A lot of time is spent in the upper-level classes focusing on interpersonal skills and deadlines. There's an emphasis on writing and professionalism, with a goal of delivering "good writing as the main content of a student publication."

The adviser of the paper gets a healthy stipend of \$5,000 a year and a dedicated classroom in which all the journalism work takes place.

The English department supervisor (in which the journalism curriculum is based), has resisted taking the paper online, believing that print journalism is a valuable resource in schools. He feels that so much of how students consume news is online and the tangible nature of publishing the physical paper is a valuable thing. Nor do they have social media because "the ease and speed at which people publish on social media is what gets them in the most trouble," he said.

There's a TV studio too at the school, which was built through an educational foundation, which taps into donations from the community. And journalism is also happening through the TV program. Even with this degree of support, the supervisor feels that "as an elective, journalism competes for enrollment with other electives and student interests, including AP electives, the arts and other academic areas, which means we need to work vigilantly to keep the reputation of the journalism program and the paper high so students will continue to join." He and his team monitor this level of interest and find ways to make the case to students and their families of the value of being on the paper.

"We help students to become more savvy consumers of news," he said. "Because the journalism world is so diffuse and varied, the challenge is to help students consult good sources for their media. Our goal is to try to emphasize to be wise readers and consumers of news."

## The newspaper adviser plays a critical role

In other schools, journalism may not be available as a four-year progression, but one motivated adviser – a Pied Piper – can single-handedly bring newsgathering into the school, either through a class or a club. These teachers attract students through sheer force of personality and will. They often tap into their own funds and their personal time, going above and beyond to actively recruit future editors, fight for resources and pour a great deal of passion into the creation of a lively student news organization.

Several such advisers said in interviews that newspaper mentorship is where they feel their teaching is at its richest and certainly the most rewarding. When their passion is met with student success and awards, there's a chance administrators might take note and the resources might start to flow. After a program has become successful, some administrators will even develop strategies to support the student journalists and tout their achievements.

But not always. Some advisers report a lukewarm reception from the administration, and in some cases, even from fellow teachers. Pointing out the deficiencies of the institution – one role of a news organization after all – can be unpopular. Prior review requests by administrators is a common gripe among advisers, who sometimes complain that their superiors are ill-informed about the laws on student press freedom and overly nervous about the kind of negative PR a student news organization can provoke.



**66% OF  
RESPONDENTS  
SAID THEIR ADVISER  
DID NOT HAVE A  
BACKGROUND IN  
JOURNALISM**

Conversely, some journalism-friendly administrators struggle to find teachers willing to run the school paper, even though the barrier to entry is low: 66% of respondents to our survey said the newspaper adviser in their school did not have a background in journalism.

No certification is required to teach journalism in New Jersey, although some teachers do obtain a voluntary certification through the Journalism Education Association.

As for prior review, some advisers with little to no journalism background, and those who are untenured, say they actively seek out a second edit by a principal for their student articles as a way to stay clear of controversy.

Teachers can be unwilling to run the student paper: it's a lot of work for little or no money. Stipends ranged from \$0 to \$7,500 a year, according to respondents to our survey. Sometimes the adviser position is viewed as a hardship post and untenured teachers often get "stuck with" the paper, and are quick to move off when they achieve seniority or feel they have a firm footing at their school.

"There's a large turnover of [journalism] advisers at high schools," said Tom McHale, an English teacher from Hunterdon Central Regional High School, who's heavily involved with the GSSPA. "In some cases the new English teacher gets it as part of their welcome to the school. Those are the programs where journalism is not strong. They just throw it at the new person and they're not going to stay [doing it] for long."

The strongest student newspapers are invariably the ones helmed by an adviser with some technical knowledge, experience in journalism and a deep-seated, personal commitment to the paper.

### **Detailed Look: High School B – The power of a committed newspaper adviser**

The student newspaper at High School B is an example of a thriving high-school journalism program that exists and is successful due in large part to the enthusiasm of a committed faculty member, though a confluence of supporting factors are at play.

Driven by a technologically skilled and motivated adviser, the paper draws in more than 100 student participants each academic year, has won the support of administrators, and consistently produces award-winning multimedia journalism.

At the heart of this success story is the adviser, now serving his 20th year. The monthly 24-page paper has an active website, YouTube channel and social media accounts. His personal Twitter account has more than 145,500 followers, and the newspaper claims to have a social media following that's among the highest in the country for a high school.

The adviser is tapped in. He has served as the president of the GSSPA and has a passion for student journalism, developed, he said, by his own experience in high school and college media. He's quite frank: it's his experience on the paper that defines his teaching career. The stories his students produce are ambitious and creative: the paper has won the New Jersey Distinguished Journalism Award every year for the past decade and the newspaper was once named Most Outstanding Newspaper in the Nation by the American Scholastic Press Association.

Students on the paper consistently do well. In the 2019 graduating class, the three editors-in-chief went to Harvard, University of Pennsylvania and Northwestern. Another student is headed to Harvard next year, the fourth in five years.



Administrative support for the school is strong. In fact, the newspaper is one of the features in the high school that is touted by the district, as well as its nationally recognized robotics team and a nationally recognized acapella group, among others.

The adviser earns \$7,500 a year in stipend (an amalgam of the newspaper, business and website stipends), which is on the high end in New Jersey for high school journalism advisers. He has a dedicated class space in a former industrial arts classroom, which is three times the size of a normal classroom, a setup that many newspaper advisers can only fantasize about.

The paper has a sizable budget of \$25,000, with \$7,000 coming from the district. The remaining \$18,000 is raised with a combination of advertising and fundraising. A full page ad costs \$400 and the paper has a couple of regular advertisers, including a number of tutoring centers. Five ads at \$400 each will cover the cost of that month's issue, which is about \$1,800. Two dodgeball contests net about \$2,000. The paper receives several thousand dollars a year in donations, from the affluent community it serves. At the school 12.5% of students are categorized as economically disadvantaged.

"From my bubble, journalism is thriving to the same extent it was 19 years ago," the adviser said.

For schools like High School B, which have a passionate adviser, a supportive district, smart and affluent students, and technological savvy, journalism education is thriving.

## **A rising threat: overscheduling and pressure to compete**

However, even in schools with all the necessary financial and academic scaffolding required for journalism to thrive and with a committed adviser taking the lead, survey respondents report a worrying new danger: the increasing pressure on students to take Advanced Placement (AP) classes which, they say, syphon students away from journalism into college level classes that will inflate their GPA, make them look impressive to admissions officers and potentially save them some money down the road by earning college credit.

"It's the rise of the AP obsession," said Staci Toporek, adviser to *The Highlander* at Governor Livingston High School in Berkeley Heights. "My editor-in-chief can't take the [journalism] class because she can't fit it into her schedule. She's super smart and she wants to take this AP math class but it's the same time as my class. So she comes in her own time in her study hall."

Teachers and administrators report that the growing interest in STEM classes has also put negative pressure on journalism as students fear journalism is not "academically impressive." High school counselors are being told by colleges that they are looking for "academic electives" and so high school administrators report taking measures to coach students on how to let

colleges know their high school paper is ambitious and allows them to acquire a range of important skills.

Other advisers, having built strong student newspapers and journalism programs, find themselves on the offensive, looking for creative ways to give their programs the academic gloss they think will ensure student involvement in the long term.

### **Detailed Look: High School C – Pressure to take AP classes even when the paper is strong**

Under the stewardship of a hard-hitting adviser, student journalists at the newspaper in High School C had an invaluable lesson in the power of student media, having unearthed the story of a series of racist and hate speech episodes in the community, and chronicled developments over a period of months.

The story began when two swastikas were found drawn on a stall in the second floor boys bathroom of the high school. Administrators initially told the student reporters that the bathroom was “under repair from some damage that was done.” But the young journalists followed the story to a Board of Education meeting, where they broke the story for the newspaper. Fired up by the impact they were having, they stayed on the story when three more swastikas were found, and then graffiti on plaques in a baseball dugout and other incidents in the community. High School C’s reporters followed the story for months as the community grappled with how to handle the issue. Eventually a student was arrested for one of the incidents. The coverage won recognition from SNO, a national platform used by high school news organizations and which collects The Best of SNO articles on its website.

Despite successfully shepherding his students through invaluable learning experiences such as these, the adviser is concerned about the future of the paper. He has seen student interest weaken in the last few years. The staff that he built up to 70 in its heyday from six people when he initially took over, has dwindled to 50. He started to see warning signs three years ago, he said. Students are increasingly wanting to take AP classes. The adviser also sees a stigma that “journalism looks bad on their resume, or doesn’t look as good as other stuff,” he said.

To combat this trend, the adviser started an advanced level class for more honors credit. But, worried this tactic might not be enough, he has enrolled in an online master’s degree program at Kent State University at his own expense in the hopes that having the master’s degree will allow him to create a relationship with a university so he can offer a journalism class in his school that students can take for college credit.

“It’s an even more drastic measure,” he said. “But it’s hard to get them to enroll in the class. They have more demands. There’s such a pressure to be in AP classes.”

## Resources and the ability to teach multimedia journalism

The GSSPA plays a critical role in supporting newspaper advisers at New Jersey schools. Twice during the course of each academic year, the organization hosts conferences, one of which brings in student editors and their advisers for journalism sessions and a competition, the other devoted to professional development for the advisers. These sessions facilitate information exchange, guidance, and support for newspaper advisers who often are operating alone in their schools. Group organizers administer certification tests for advisers, which is useful to teachers for professional development purposes, though not a requirement for them to teach journalism. Senior members of the GSSPA have also been active in pushing for policy changes that would protect student journalists in the state.

Advisers interviewed often lamented the lack of resources, not an unusual complaint in the teaching profession. Many yearn for a dedicated classroom for journalism instruction, which could serve as a sort of newsroom. The struggle for resources has implications for the ability of an adviser to take the newspaper into the digital age. Consequently, multimedia journalism adoption in New Jersey high schools is mixed.

Some advisers reported struggling to scrape together the small amount of funding necessary to pay for a web hosting site. Others had more expensive requests, such as camera equipment, although many acknowledged the relatively low cost of digital journalism compared to the high cost of printing a school newspaper.

Some advisers yearned for professional development opportunities to learn such technological skills as DSLR photography or to learn best practices for teaching video shooting and editing. Others report being self-taught and using their own tech-savvy to take their school's publication digital first. Still others say they struggle to breach the bureaucratic hurdles to teaching converged journalism when the computers are in the English department, the cameras are in the art department and the lights are in the drama department.

### Detailed Look: High School D – Going digital

When the current adviser took over the newspaper at High School D, he was walking into an institution that had been running since the school was built in 1960. Interest had ebbed and flowed over the decades, but in the 1990s and 2000s the paper had thrived under the leadership of a teacher that the current adviser calls “a force of nature.”

The history of the paper had always been print focused, and when he took over as adviser in 2012 he left it that way. But after a few years, feeling more confident in his own instincts, he decided to make some changes. “I was like, ‘Yo, it’s 2015, let’s get on the internet.’”

This adviser had worked as a professional newspaper copy editor at the dawn of the internet age and his job then was doing the “data dump” of print content onto the website. He’s admittedly a bit of a tech geek, so when he decided it was time for the newspaper at High School D to go digital, he just went on Amazon and bought some mics, went to Ebay and “bought a camcorder, and a ten-year-old Mac mini for 80 bucks.” So for a relatively small cost up front, he had a pilot program. He noted that one of the blessings of digital journalism is that the financial threshold to entry is lower than it was for radio or print journalism, where the cost of printing can eat up an entire budget.

His students, he found, were inspired by the multimedia journalism he was getting them to do. Their enthusiasm impressed the administration, he said, and they awarded him \$1,500 worth of resources.

He can create a sort of newsroom environment as his classroom is a computer lab and all the journalism classes are based there. The multimedia journalism he’s promoting has fueled student interest noticeably. “At least for me as a teacher, I found that in my classroom the students are fired up that are interested in multimedia,” he said. “They think this stuff is cool.”

In Fall 2019, he had a group of girls who were enthusiastic about a podcast they wanted to do. Some of the boys didn’t want to get involved, he said, but High School D, which has a little over 1,000 students, is a big sports school, so he made the pitch that if they got involved with the news organization they could be on the sidelines interviewing the quarterback. That’s when they suddenly saw the appeal.

Now, a few years into going digital, he has achieved a cross-platform publication. The paper is produced five times a year. The website, which is hosted on [SNO](#), is updated with content on a weekly basis. They have a social media account and a strong reputation among the student population.

The adviser is motivated, keeping an eye on eighth-graders to see if any are worth recruiting. He keeps the atmosphere of the newsroom casual. “At the end of the day this is an elective for me and for them,” he said. “They don’t have to be here, they’re here because they want to be.”

## **The high school news deserts**

While it’s clear that a significant number of high schools in New Jersey do provide some avenue for journalism exploration, there are a number that do not provide any journalism opportunities for their students, whether inside or outside of class. Knowing precisely how many high school “news deserts” there are is difficult for the reasons articulated above. However, the DOE data did allow a count of how many public high schools in one academic year did not have journalism classes in their curriculums.

According to DOE records, 242 of 443 (54.6%) high schools were not listed as offering journalism classes in 2017/18, the most recent year for which statistics are available. This figure does not account for the existence of newspapers that are offered as extra-curricular activities, but, as suggested earlier, it's an indication of how many schools have found a place for journalism instruction in their curriculums.

In some high schools based in communities with a low socio-economic profile, administrators and teachers said they are preoccupied with teaching more fundamental skills – and journalism is not one of them. Very often there is no money for adviser stipends and student motivation is low. According to an educator from a school which has a high percentage of immigrant students, when writing doesn't come easily, as when English is a second language, students ask themselves, 'Why voluntarily do *more* writing after school?'

For students in these schools with a curiosity about journalism, the opportunities to learn more are few.

### **Detailed Look: High School A – No student news organization or journalism classes**

Natalie Santos (name changed) now a senior at High School A, first learned about journalism from a television show: *The Flash*, a series based on the DC Comics superhero. She was drawn to the character, Iris West, who is a reporter for the *Picture News* based in Central City. Her life seemed engaging and fun to Natalie. Other depictions of female journalists in movies deepened her interest in the profession. "I kept hearing 'journalist' a lot," she said. "So I looked it up. It was pretty cool."

But when she looked around her high school for ways to explore her interest in journalism, there really was nothing for her. She noticed a publication, but it was written by teachers, was online and none of the students seemed to know about it.

An administrator at High School A said the student newspaper at the school was eliminated a number of years ago in a round of cuts to electives provoked by a financial crunch. Teaching faculty have not been interested or qualified to revive the paper, which seemed like extra work for no pay as there's no stipend money available for a newspaper adviser, the administrator said.

Compounding that obstacle, most students also apparently have no interest, the administrator said. Three quarters of the 2,000 students in the school are categorized as "economically disadvantaged," and 96% are Hispanic and the majority speak Spanish at home. The administrator said there seemed to be little student interest in joining a newspaper because students consider it to be extra writing, and therefore a hard sell.

However, teaching faculty at High School A have not given up on finding ways to shoehorn elements of journalism into the curriculum. This year, a new teacher is including journalism in his language arts class. The idea is for the students to read informational texts as well as literature, looking at bias, how information is gathered, and understanding what reliable sources are. There is talk of getting students to write their own pieces and the end result would be some kind of digital newspaper, maybe a google doc that goes out to the whole school. There's hope among the administration that if this pans out, it could possibly become a class and then a newspaper, providing an outlet for the students at the school who display an interest in journalism and are not put off by the extra writing.

Natalie may have to wait until college to explore journalism. On a recent college tour, she was particularly struck by the student radio station, which reinforced the notion that journalism could be a career option. "I was explaining to my mom what a podcast is and that it's a job, making podcasts," she recalls. In the fall of her senior year she was considering majoring in journalism in college with a minor in dance. "Both my parents and all my family are really excited for me," she said.

Despite its important role in the correct functioning of a democratic society, journalism education is not guaranteed for New Jersey teenagers. Some students are going to schools with established journalism programs and vibrant student newspapers. Others may have schools where journalism education is precarious, offered some years and not others. Still others are going to schools where journalism education simply does not exist.

The reason for this variation lies chiefly in the fact that journalism is not a mandatory part of the high school curriculum, even though by New Jersey's own academic standards, participation on a school newspaper provides students with the opportunity to acquire a vast range of skills. Resources, technical knowhow, and the interests of educators also impact the ability of a high school to offer some form of journalism experience to students. In many cases, the existence of an active student newspaper is due in large part to the will of one committed adviser.

This study found that in schools where journalism is offered, advisers are not reporting any significant diminished interest on the part of students in response to upheaval in professional journalism. However, many advisers fear that increasing pressure to take college level AP classes is putting pressure on student's schedules and acting to disincentivize journalism because it is not offered at the college level.

# Recommendations

The biggest input for this study came from newspaper advisers working at schools which, for the most part, supported some kind of journalism education. They were the people who responded to the email survey and who agreed to be interviewed in depth. A handful felt well supported and well remunerated, but most expressed a wish for more professional support beyond that which is offered by the GSSPA and some of the other national scholastic journalism organizations, such as the Journalism Education Association and the Scholastic Press Association. The most common requests from advisers were:

- Professional development opportunities. Many said they wanted instruction in how best to take their news organization online. Others have no background in journalism, but a willingness to learn. Some said they needed help with acquiring technical skills.
- Funds to buy equipment, such as cameras or camcorders, or to pay for an internet hosting site to take their newspapers online.
- Money to fund stipends, which would make running the news organization an appealing proposition. One educator in a school that had no journalism classes or student newspaper said funding for stipends would be a significant motivator for teachers to start up and maintain a student newspaper.

## Recommendations for further study:

- This study and other similar studies in other states and at the national level, draw heavily on input from newspaper advisers. More information needs to be obtained about the schools where there is no journalism newspaper adviser and where no journalism exists at all, either as a newspaper club or a class. This would facilitate an understanding of how this deficit could be addressed.
- Anecdotal evidence and a small amount of quantitative data suggest that economically challenged communities and those with large minority and immigrant communities were less likely to have journalism options in their high schools. Further study could solidify this correlation and, again, redress this deficiency.
- Comparisons to journalism programs in other states would also be worthwhile. Some of the New Jersey advisers interviewed for this study said their trips to national conferences exposed them to newspaper advisers from states where they felt there was much more support for their journalism initiatives.
- Most of the journalism in New Jersey high schools was newspaper based, but a number of schools have television production classes that do produce news. Further study of these programs would also add to the understanding of the journalism options for high school students.
- This topic warrants a wider comparative study of the structural features of communities and schools both with and without journalism programs.

- It would be valuable to understand what if any link exists between students' involvement in journalism in high school and their likelihood to pursue journalism in college and as a career.
- Could journalism be developed as an AP course?



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