Crossing the border
Investigating a migrant's death in Arizona
P. 6

Early release
Uncovering Nebraska's bad sentencing math
P. 9

Detroit's Debts
Deep investigation into the city's fallout
P. 12

The IRE Journal

SUMMER 2014

SCRUTINIZING SCHOOLS

Upcoming Watchdog Workshops

Mark your calendar and register today for these great training opportunities coming soon.

Buffalo, NY October 18th-19th

Jacksonville, FL November 8th-9th

For more details and registration information, visit ire.org/events-and-training/watchdog-workshops/

Save the date

2015 CAR Conference

Join IRE and NICAR for our annual conference devoted to computer-assisted reporting. Come and learn about tools you need to dig deeper into stories and give readers and viewers the information they want.

Thursday, March 5, 2015 – Sunday, March 8, 2015
Atlanta, Georgia

The IRE Journal

SUMMER 2014

4 EXPANDING THE INVESTIGATIVE BRAND
By Mark Horvit

5 MEMBER NEWS

6 FOLLOWING A MIGRANT'S PATH
Bringing life to a journey — after death
By Erin Siegal McIntyre

9 BAD MATH
Department of Corrections' data reveals early releases
By Matt Wynn and Todd Cooper, Omaha World-Herald

12 TRACKING THE DEBT
An exhaustive effort to document Detroit's economic decline
By Nathan Bomey and John Gallagher, Detroit Free Press

32 FOI FILES
Breaking the foundations of secrecy
By David Cuillier, University of Arizona School of Journalism

33 COLLECTED WISDOM
Managing the "go big" investigation
By Ellen Gabler, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

34 SNAPSHOTS FROM OUR BLOGS

Students arrive for school Monday, Sept. 8, 2014, in Philadelphia. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke)

SCRUTINIZING SCHOOLS

16 **BROADENING THE EDUCATION BEAT**
Finding data and documents to dig past school board meetings
By Alia Wong, Honolulu Civil Beat

20 **TRACKING CHARTER FINANCE**
Watchdogging nation's largest public subsidy for new charter schools
By Dan Mihalopoulos and Paul Saltzman, Chicago Sun-Times

23 **STANDARDS AND STORIES**
Push politicians for a real conversation about Common Core
By Sarah Butrymowicz, The Hechinger Report

25 **IT'S NOT ON THE TEST**
Investigating education data beyond test scores
Meredith Broussard, Temple University; and Coulter Jones, The Wall Street Journal

27 **DIGGING FOR SALARY DATA**
Superintendents' contracts reveal additional perks
By Kelly Hinchcliffe, WRAL.com

29 **IMMUNIZATION INVESTIGATION**
Prying the state for student shot records reveals a surprising story
By Misti Crane and Jennifer Smith Richards, The Columbus Dispatch

31 **IRE RESOURCES**

The IRE Journal

SUMMER 2014

Volume 37 | Number 3

MANAGING EDITOR
Megan Luther

ART DIRECTOR
Erica Mendez Babcock

CONTRIBUTING LEGAL EDITOR
Sam Terilli

EDITORIAL ASSOCIATE
AND STORY EDITOR
Cameron Dodd

IRE

IRE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
Mark Horvit

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

PRESIDENT
Sarah Cohen
The New York Times

VICE PRESIDENT
Matt Goldberg
KNBC-TV

TREASURER
Andrew Donohue
The Center for Investigative Reporting

SECRETARY
Ellen Gabler
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

EXECUTIVE MEMBER
Josh Meyer
Medill National Security Journalism Initiative

CHAIRMAN
David Cay Johnston
author/freelance

Ziva Branstetter
Tulsa World

Leonard Downie Jr.
The Washington Post

T. Christian Miller
ProPublica

Jill Riepenhoff
The Columbus Dispatch

Nicole Vap
KUSA-TV

Phil Williams
WTVF-TV

Chrys Wu
The New York Times

The IRE Journal (ISSN0164-7016) is published four times a year by Investigative Reporters & Editors, Inc., 141 Neff Annex, Missouri School of Journalism, Columbia, MO 65211, 573-882-2042. Email: megan@ire.org. U.S. subscriptions are $70 for individuals, $85 for libraries and $125 for institutions/businesses. International subscriptions are $90 for individuals and $150 for all others. Periodical postage paid at Columbia, MO. Postmaster: Please send address changes to IRE. USPS#451-670

© 2014 Investigative Reporters & Editors, Inc.

Expanding the investigative brand

BY MARK HORVIT

What exactly is investigative reporting? I've been asked that more and more frequently. Typically, the question comes from one of two kinds of people:

- Journalists at news organizations that are now emphasizing investigative reporting, who wonder what exactly that's going to mean for them and how they're going to satisfy their bosses if they're not given more time and resources.
- Consumers of news who are seeing the phrase attached to a growing number of stories — in print, on-air and online — and who are trying to parse out exactly what differentiates an investigative story from any other news story.

Both of these trends are rooted in the same motivation: With a growing number of available news and information sources for audiences to choose from, simply reporting what's happening is not enough. Many news organizations see "investigative reporting" as the brand that can differentiate them.

This has led to a pretty liberal use of the term "investigation" within the industry. Through the early 2000s, the stories that were bestowed with that title were those done by reporters on I-Teams, who had weeks or months (or years) to work on a single project. Today, many news organizations define the term much more loosely and regularly throw the investigative label on quick-turn enterprise pieces.

Clearly, much of this is marketing and an attempt to make up for the cutbacks many organizations have made in their investigative departments. Some longtime IRE members see this as a watering down of investigative journalism.

But I think it's an important development and one that by and large is serving audiences well.

Nothing takes the place of having a person, or a team, dedicated to long-term investigative work. Even newer media organizations like BuzzFeed are acknowledging that doing so raises your game, builds your credibility and increases your impact.

However, when investigative reporting was sequestered on an I-Team, in many newsrooms it let everyone else off the hook, and daily coverage often suffered mightily.

Today, there is a greater expectation in a growing number of newsrooms that more of those on staff will know how to dig deeper and add meaning, context and value to every story of significance. Many of the managers who contact me looking for someone to fill a vacant position want reporters who know how to read a budget, comb through court records and make open records requests. We all know that hasn't always been the case.

So in today's media environment, what's billed as an investigative report may be an in-depth project, but it may also be a story where one dogged reporter fought to get a disciplinary report, requested data on the number of police officers who have been disciplined, or got the inspection records for the plant where a worker was badly injured that morning.

Are the results always what we would have once considered "investigative reporting?" Usually not. But reporters, editors and producers are now routinely producing quick-turn enterprise that simply wouldn't have been done a few years ago.

I'll take that kind of investigative journalism any day.

Mark Horvit is executive director of IRE and NICAR. He can be reached at mhorvit@ire.org or 573-882-1984.

Knight grant supports DocumentCloud improvements, sustainability

DocumentCloud, a free, open source tool used by hundreds of newsrooms to analyze and publish documents, will improve its offerings and develop a plan toward sustainability with $1.4 million in new support from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. The two-year support will focus on strengthening the future of DocumentCloud and introducing enhancements and features that will make the popular platform faster, easier to use and more robust.

DocumentCloud was created with the support of a Knight News Challenge Grant in 2009 and became a project of Investigative Reporters and Editors in 2011. It now hosts more than 1 million documents that have been uploaded, analyzed, annotated and published by journalists to better inform their audiences and make their own work more transparent. Material available on DocumentCloud.org has received more than 200 million hits and has been used for stories as high profile as the release of the Snowden documents, which were presented to the public by The Washington Post and The Guardian through the platform.

New funding for DocumentCloud was shaped by a market study designed to look at ways to make the tool better and more sustainable; the study included a survey of user preferences, a review of similar software tools and consultation with experts. Based on study outcomes, the goal is to keep basic services free, while adding features that users can purchase through subscription services. Knight support will allow the DocumentCloud team to expand, creating the capacity to improve the basic service and add premium features.

Improvements to the tool will make it faster and more user-friendly. Existing archives will be more accessible and documents will be easier to share. DocumentCloud will redesign the platform to manage a larger number of users and future technology needs. A new advisory group of media entrepreneurs will help guide DocumentCloud's growth.

IRE launches IRE Radio Podcast

Get a brief recap of IRE news and upcoming events, interviews with journalists and IRE staff, and audio tips from the best in the biz. The IRE Radio Podcast episodes are available on iTunes and SoundCloud and open to the public. Past episodes have included reporting around FERPA, investigating scandals at the VA and tips for battling FOIA denials.

Check out other episodes here: http://ire.org/blog/ire-radio/

Has IRE helped you?

Did an IRE training event, conference or workshop help you complete a story? Maybe you used the NICAR Database Library to add context to your work. We want to hear about it. Tell us how IRE has helped you and your testimonial will show up in our new Impact Tracker, an interactive map that will be embedded on our website.

The work IRE does promotes transparency, exposes wrongdoings and helps safeguard the most vulnerable members of our society. We need your support to continue this worthwhile work. Take the survey here: http://ire.org/impactsurvey/

If you have any questions about this survey, please contact IRE Web Editor Sarah Hutchins at sarah@ire.org.

Maud Beelman has been named to a new position overseeing news coverage and editorial operations for The Associated Press in Arkansas, Oklahoma and Texas. Beelman will cover breaking news, develop investigative enterprise for all formats in the three states, and work closely with news editors in all three states.

Mark Katches has been named editor of The Oregonian and vice president of content for the Oregonian Media Group. Previously, Katches was editorial director for The Center for Investigative Reporting.

Kendall Taggart is joining BuzzFeed as an investigative data journalist. She comes from The Center for Investigative Reporting, where she created the America's Worst Charities series, winner of the 2013 Barlett & Steele Award.

IRE members elected seven directors to the IRE board at the organization's annual conference in San Francisco. The newly elected members are: **Sarah Cohen**, The New York Times; **Andrew Donohue**, The Center for Investigative Reporting; **Ellen Gabler**, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel; **Jill Riepenhoff**, The Columbus Dispatch; **Nicole Vap**, KUSA-TV in Denver; **Phil Williams**, WTVF-TV in Nashville; and **Chrys Wu**, The New York Times.

The board then selected members of the executive committee. They are: **Sarah Cohen**, president; **Matt Goldberg**, vice president; **Ellen Gabler**, secretary; **Andrew Donohue**, treasurer, **Josh Meyer** and **David Cay Johnston**.

The membership also elected two members to the Contest Committee. They are: **Fernando Diaz**, Hoy Chicago and **Norberto Santana Jr.**, Voice of OC.

Read updates online or submit Member News items at ire.org/member-news.

Can't afford to attend IRE training?

Apply for a fellowship or scholarship!

www.ire.org/events-and-training/fellowships-and-scholarships/

Following a Migrant's Path

Bringing life to a journey — after death

By Erin Siegal McIntyre

When Seth Freed Wessler and I set out to examine the correlation between the Obama administration's record-shattering deportation rates and the death toll for migrant border crossers, we thought we'd build a story based on hard statistics. We planned to wrench information from various arms of the U.S. government and then cross-reference it to calculate a basic percentage: How many corpses found in the desert belonged to people who were previously deported? What percentage died trying to return?

It seemed like a simple question worthy of pursuit, especially since no one had done it before. But when we began looking for data to prove the connection between deportations and deaths, we hit a wall.

Overcoming data difficulties

Migrant deaths are not tracked systematically, and the way autopsies are handled in the United States varies from county to county. California's two border counties have different systems: a Sheriff Coroner in Imperial County and a Medical Examiner's Office in San Diego County. New Mexico's three border counties are part of a central state medical investigator system. Within the 14 counties along the Texas border, individual justices of the peace decide when and how deaths are tabulated, examined and accounted for.

We reached out to all of these counties but found most did not specifically indicate which decedents were migrant border crossers. The exception was the Pima County Medical Examiner's office in Tucson — one reason that the Chief Medical Examiner fields several calls from reporters each year.

Because Pima County clearly demarcates migrant deaths, we decided to narrow our scope to the three Arizona border counties under its purview. We filed public records requests and obtained existing county spreadsheets, reports and documents showing migrants' ages, genders, nationalities, names and causes of death (when known) over the past 10 years.

At the time of our reporting, the most recent complete dataset available was for 2012. Of the 156 migrants whose bodies had been found that year, Pima County verified 86 of their identities.

Courtesy Betty Alvarez

Tiger Martínez with his daughter in Honduras. Martínez was deported four times before he died crossing the border in Arizona.

We began looking for as much information as we could about these 86 particular decedents, filing FOIA requests to the three immigration agencies — Immigration and Customs Enforcement, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, and U.S. Customs and Border Protection — and asking for any existing files on each named migrant, including full names, dates of birth and nationalities. If the identities on the Pima County list matched those in government deportation records, we'd know we had a match. We didn't think our requests would be blocked since our subjects were deceased and, therefore, exempt from Privacy Act exclusions.

But we were stonewalled anyway. CBP refused to release information, saying they didn't want to release the wrong file, since migrants often use false identities. After backchannel conversations and working non-PIO sources, we were finally handed back a black and white photocopy of our list of names. The names that had previously encountered U.S. immigration authorities were highlighted, CBP told us — but they warned us not to depend on their information.

To test their highlights, we requested the complete file from the Pima County Medical Examiner's Office for five of the 86 migrants on the list. Three of the names had been highlighted by CBP, and two hadn't. When we got the records, they proved a lack of accuracy in the CBP data. Some of the migrants that CBP claimed had never been encountered actually did have existing records of interactions with immigration enforcement.

So instead, we zeroed in on nonprofits and humanitarian organizations. We sent the list of names to groups working with migrants along the border. One in particular, called No More Deaths, forwarded our message to its listserv. Several volunteers, who work providing aid, such as food and water to border crossers, remembered certain individuals on the list, supplying details and family contact information.

Seth Freed Wessler

Martínez's mother, Betty Alvarez, shows the belongings that were found on her son's body during an interview in her Bronx apartment.

Finding a single subject

Without access to broad data sets, we began thinking of our story as an investigative profile of sorts. It needed to feel fresh, and we came up with two ways to make it feel that way. First, we wanted to find a main character whom American audiences would see as non-traditional, namely someone who wasn't from Mexico. Second, we decided to provide rich details and context by digging into current migration and deportation trends.

Instead of relying on a calculated percentage as our story's backbone, we changed course and created a collage of reporting that could illustrate various nuances intrinsic to the issues at hand. We went narrow and deep, as opposed to wide and shallow.

One particular woman who had worked with No More Deaths told us she had twice met one of the migrants on the Pima County death list. She remembered him having family and a son in New York City. He'd been deported before, she told us, likely more than once. His name was Tiger.

We began searching. On Facebook, we found a man named Tiger Martínez . He had two profiles: one for "Allan Martínez " and one for "Tiger Martínez ." In the Pima County list of deceased, Tiger was "Allan Modesto Martínez Alvarez." As a profile subject, he was unconventional because he was younger than most of those found dead and came from the Afro-Honduran Garífuna community.

We requested his full autopsy file from Pima County and began mapping his friends and family via public social media photos, profiles and comments. Remarkably, in the autopsy file, a phone number for his mother, Betty Alvarez, had not been redacted. There were also lots of descriptive details in the report we later incorporated into our lede.

For the story to work, we needed Tiger Martínez to become the relatable human face and entry point to a highly polarizing issue. And as our human-sourced reporting progressed, we realized that Martínez's experience was a clear embodiment of the situation we had initially set out to investigate. We learned he'd crossed the border multiple times, pulled back to the U.S. by family, fear and economics. He'd been deported four times before perishing under the Arizona sun.

Bringing Tiger back to life

At this point, we had enough pre-reporting to pitch our story. We placed the piece upon first pitch, choosing Al Jazeera America because of its robust long-form section, attention to graphics and commitment to beautiful interactive storytelling.

Yet tracking Tiger's multiple journeys retroactively proved difficult. No single person could account for his full story. His mother and brother were privy to a partial view of Tiger and his friends offered disparate accounts, some describing the young man glowingly, others raising concerns about his judgment and motivations. We interviewed more than a dozen friends and family. Some of them, young Garífuna men and women from Tiger's Honduran town, had traveled with him on one or more of his journeys north. Others had worked with him in the U.S. or dated him.

We pieced together which routes he'd taken and when. We referenced archived news clips from Mexican, Honduran and Guatemalan newspapers to cobble together a picture of the news events that happened then, partially informing his choices.

Writing Tiger's journey was challenging largely because we didn't want to fatigue readers. Tiger was caught in the cyclical redundancy of migrating north, getting deported and trying again,

time after time. During each attempt, we chose to elaborate on unique aspects of his experiences that could be related to the macro: a common experience of immigration, an overarching theme or a greater human truth.

Still, holes remained. We explained discrepancies as they arose. Was Tiger in a gang? No one had ever told us he was. But when we were almost finished writing we came across photos posted by Tiger's Facebook friends that showed young men, including Tiger, wearing blue, throwing hand signs and making references to a specific clique of the Crips, an American street gang. When we gently pressed the dead man's close friends and family, some said yes; others, no. We reported both views.

We were so fortunate to come across Tiger's story. It was relatively easy to get people talking, even when they were asked difficult questions, because the young man was charismatic and popular. We reached sources in Honduras and central and southern Mexico via phone. Seth reported from New York City, where Tiger's family lives, and I reported, largely via phone and Skype, from Tijuana, where I was based.

We brought Tiger's story to life with details by spending extra time trying to tighten the writing to make it as readable and compelling as possible. It helped that Seth and I each had a pre-existing knowledge of immigration, complete with unused FOIA'ed information and developed sources from other stories we'd individually reported. Seth had his ICE contact; I had mine. Both helped and let us largely avoid public information officers. We also just got lucky: Seth and I had only met in person once for a brief coffee, but we collaborated naturally. We often worked from one shared GoogleDoc draft simultaneously, with an open instant message window for trading questions and concerns.

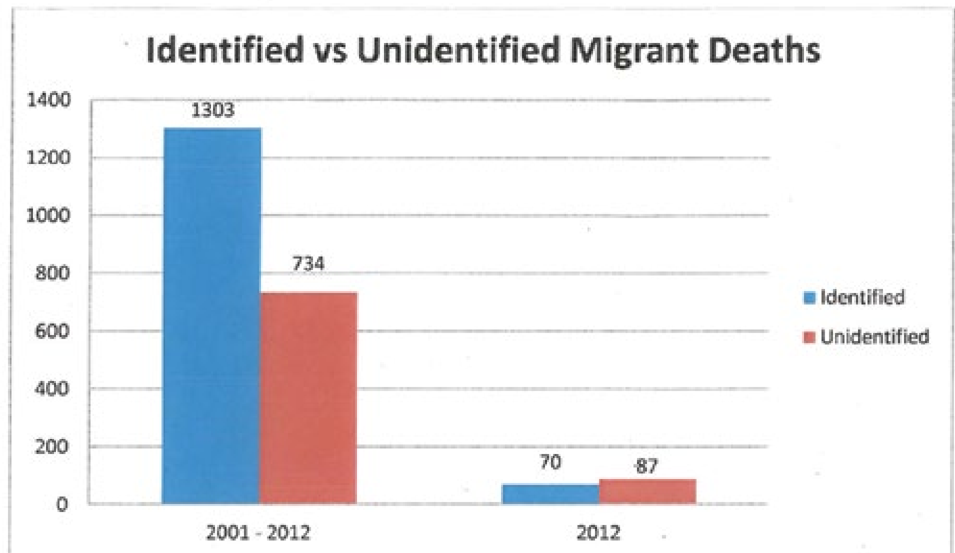
When we turned in our 7,000-word feature, we didn't know Al Jazeera America would break it up into a seven-chapter mini-series. But the design worked well, giving readers time to exhale, time to consider infographics and visuals, and time to reflect on Tiger's traumatic experience without getting overwhelmed by its graphic nature and heaviness.

Erin Siegal McIntyre is a Senior Fellow at the Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism and an investigative producer/correspondent with Documentales Univision. She's the author of the award-winning book "Finding Fernanda" (Beacon Press), a Redux Pictures photographer and loves to chat on Twitter—say hi @ErinSiegal.

Seth Freed Wessler is an independent reporter focusing on investigations on inequality, immigration, child welfare, punishment and race. He currently reports for NBCNews.com's In Plain Sight Project and is a visiting scholar at NYU's Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute. On Twitter, he's @SethFW

Tips for freelance investigations

- Be liberal thinking about reporting expenses and include your own personal investment of pre-reporting time. Think about a single investigation within the context of the other stories you're working on, since there are only so many funding sources. Many grantmakers who support reporting won't give two grants for two stories to the same reporter.
- Use a lawyer or agent to review contracts, if you're not comfortable negotiating solo. Solicit advice from other colleagues and talk to others who have already negotiated with and worked for the same media outlet. Some media clients might try to tell you that they won't or can't change a boilerplate contract when in fact they can and often do. It is the responsibility of all freelancers to fight for fair pay and fair contracts.
- Know your editors, read their previous pieces and try to understand what they're like to work with. Sometimes there will be fact-checking, sometimes there won't. Sometimes a story edit will pass through multiple layers of editors, but sometimes a first draft is published as-is, without feedback.
- After phone calls about story planning and shaping, type notes into an email and send it to all parties involved, to avoid any confusion.
- Come up with a title for your story and submit it when you hand in your draft. If you don't come up with a title, you might very well get stuck with an unsparing label that will drive readers away — or, even worse, something that isn't quiet accurate or appropriate.
- As publication nears, suggest a variety of sample tweets and social media marketing strategies to your client to help the audience find your story.
- Speak up if you run into any problems. For example, Al Jazeera America initially used "illegal" to describe immigrants in our story's subhead. We immediately asked them to remove the reference, as per the current Associated Press Stylebook guidelines. They complied happily.



Courtesy Pima County Medical Examiner's Office

A bar graph showing the numbers of identified versus unidentified dead from the Pima County Medical Examiner's Office 2012 annual report.

Bad Math

Department of Corrections' data reveals early releases

By Matt Wynn and Todd Cooper
Omaha World-Herald

In early May, World-Herald staff writer Todd Cooper was at his usual stomping grounds: the Douglas County Courthouse.

He ran into a prosecutor who was red-faced and fuming.

"What's your problem?" Cooper asked. The prosecutor told him.

The 20s' shooter was in court on a day pass, she said, referring to Quentin Jackson, nicknamed after the strip club where he shot a bouncer.

"He was wearing a suit and tie and had some woman with him," she said.

The shooting happened just a few years back and Cooper knew The World-Herald had a story.

But he initially thought it was just a quirky story about a guy who wore a Bernie Mac suit to court on a day pass, which required him to report back to prison at night — a pass he probably shouldn't have had.

Cooper — a reporter for 20 years, 12 of them at Omaha's main courthouse — had covered the original sentencing of the man in the cream-colored suit. Jackson had shot a bouncer after a dispute over a bar tab. Hit in the head, the bouncer survived.

A judge sentenced Jackson to 15 years in prison. Under Nebraska sentencing guidelines, almost all sentences are cut in half, under a "good time" law.

But there's a catch. When the sentence involves gun crimes, drug dealing, child rapes or serial criminals, prisoners must serve a mandatory minimum term in full before the rest of their sentence is halved.

Cooper looked at the Nebraska Department of Corrections website. It correctly listed that Jackson had a mandatory minimum term — 5 years. And it listed the correct parole date for Jackson. But it cut his maximum sentence of 15 years in half.

Under that flawed formula, Jackson would be released after 7 1/2 years. His actual release date, however, should have been after 10 years — the five year mandatory term plus half of what was left.

"I did ask the same question that you asked," a spokeswoman said. "I can't tell you anything more than that's how it's been done."

Photos by Ryan Soderlin | The World-Herald

Candace Longwell, left, holds her baby, Alex, as Christina Kelly kisses her head on July 7 at Kelly's home in Lincoln, Nebraska. The baby's father and Kelly's brother, Matthew Hungate, is back in prison. He was rounded up to finish out his sentence after an investigation revealed he had been released from prison early.

Turning vague answers into a story

Cooper wrote a story about what he had found, questioning why the prisoner wasn't behind bars.

In response, Cooper did some more digging. The prosecutor told him she also had argued with Corrections over the case and had told prison officials they were wrong. Cooper showed Corrections' projected release date to Jackson's judge, who confirmed Cooper's conclusion.

"They're wrong," the judge said. "That's not how you do it."

Another prosecutor provided Cooper with how, as best he could tell, Corrections was computing sentences. He wondered whether Corrections was doing it that way to ease chronic prison overcrowding.

All three pointed Cooper to two Nebraska Supreme Court decisions. The rulings — one in 2002 and a more explicit one in 2013 — told Corrections clearly how release dates should be calculated for prisoners with mandatory minimum terms.

Matthew Hungate, 34, of Lincoln, Nebraska, is interviewed by World-Herald reporters at the Nebraska Department of Corrections Diagnostic and Evaluation Center on July 7 in Lincoln.

The World-Herald was ready to write a follow-up story, that a strip-club shooter was going to be released early.

Then Cooper — with the help of editor Cate Folsom — took a breath. They both agreed: We needed to see how many other Quentin Jacksons there are, how many others have wrong release dates.

Ryan Soderlin | The World-Herald

Matt Wynn and Alissa Skelton interview Abdul Alameen, who was rounded up and returned to prison to finish out a sentence stemming from a weapons charge.

Scraping data

That's when Matt Wynn got involved to help cut through some of Corrections' records to get at an answer. Before the month-long project was over, we deployed a boatload of scrapers, ran dozens of queries and, ultimately, combed through hundreds of pages of court records to double-check each potential case we found.

We had no idea how complex it would be. Our first step was to request a roster of all inmates serving sentences with mandatory minimums. We were turned down and pointed instead to the department's website, which provides an "inmate locator" search form where the public can find basic information about a prisoner's holding location, charges and the like. On the site, you can download a spreadsheet with a roster of inmates. Between the site and the spreadsheets, we had data. But the more we dug into it, the more we realized both the website and the spreadsheets were flawed.

We decided to use the outdated spreadsheet we downloaded as a guide for a web scraper. We already had a scraper for prison records built using the programming language Python,, and Wynn took that and perverted it to our own, specific needs. Using each inmate's ID number from the spreadsheet, we built our own Frankendata based on the up-to-date inmate locator information.

Wynn ran the scraper during work hours with a note in the headers identifying who we were, what we were doing and how to contact Wynn. Eventually, it became clear that this was a sturdy site, and our requests for a few thousand records wouldn't hurt anything.

After the scraper ran for a day, we had reliable information on some 20,000 former and current inmates incarcerated since 1996, when the state first passed mandatory minimums legislation.

The scraper, with tweaks, has been a workhorse throughout the project. For follow-ups, we used it to gather mug shots en masse, find sentences that were recalculated but never publicly disclosed by the DOC and more.

Once we put it to work, we had some semblance of reliable data. Now we had to figure out what to do with it. We zeroed in on three dates: a prisoner's "in date," parole eligibility date and "jam date" — either actual or projected release date.

Cleaning the data

At first, we went after inmates who, like Jackson, were set to be released or had been released from prison before they were eligible for parole. That netted us hundreds of cases. So many, in fact, that we started making unilateral moves to cut the number down. We knew of several diversion programs that could cut a prisoner's sentence by six months. Since the majority of cases we saw could fit into that category, we omitted them from our results.

But we still had work to do. Our method had excluded some clear cases of improper sentencing. To capture those cases, we had to take a different approach.

All prisoners served half their time. The only exceptions were in cases of mandatory minimum sentences and some rare cases of "good time" revocation. With that understanding, our approach became far simpler. We knew how long each prisoner actually would serve or had served. And we knew how long he was supposed to serve. We ran a query to find those mandatory minimum sentences for prisoners who were not serving more than half their sentences.

This time, we hit pay dirt. We had more than 200 cases that seemed to fit the bill. For a few glorious minutes, we thought we had a great story without too much grunt work.

Then we looked closer. While we did have a decent list, we also had a lot of false positives. As we spot-checked our results, we came to an unfortunate conclusion that's probably plain to anyone who regularly works with court data: The information on time served that could be gleaned from prison data was only half the story.

The prison records didn't factor in time spent awaiting sentencing. If a person was jailed in March, then convicted in October, prison records correctly lopped eight months off the sentence to account for the time in jail. But nowhere in the records did it explain why. That meant we couldn't come to any conclusions based on the analysis we'd completed.

In the end, we had to dig through the records for every possible mix-up in Nebraska's antiquated court records system. The process was tedious. We couldn't just spot-check the data. Record by record, we computed what each prisoner's release date should have been. Once we had the documents, we could track down the time they spent awaiting trial, add that to our findings and know for sure that we had identified a mistake.

We faced severe deadline pressure for a project of this size. Omaha's judges had a mid-June meeting planned with the new director of Nebraska's prison system. One judge planned to confront the director at the meeting.

So we jammed as much double-checking as we could into a span of about three weeks and came up with conservative numbers. The initial report: At least 200 prisoners collectively had at least 750 years shaved off their sentences.

Barrett Stinson | Grand Island Independent

Grand Island resident Mitzi Mohr is one of hundreds of former Nebraska prison inmates who were released early by Nebraska Department of Correctional Services officials due to their use of a flawed formula to calculate sentences. Mohr was eventually placed on furlough, allowing her to continue living outside so long as she reported regularly to parole officers.

Seeing results

Our report led the governor to demand that Corrections review all sentences and repair those with miscalculations. As a result, the department determined that more than 750 prisoners were affected. And the state has added more than 2000 collective years to their sentences.

As we predicted before the first story was published, the scandal has spit out stories all summer.

Along with reporter Alissa Skelton, we've made more revelations in the wake of the initial investigation:

- Emails and memos obtained by the newspaper have shown that Corrections deliberately ignored the Supreme Court's orders on how to calculate sentences. Objecting to the Supreme Court's ruling, one prison manager cited overcrowding, the "inmates' best interest" and the fact that recalculating release dates would be a "real mess."
- The governor has launched a personnel investigation, and state lawmakers have called for a criminal investigation.
- Prisoners have been rounded up on the job, at their homes or from work-release centers to be returned to maximum security prisons, throwing their families and futures into limbo.

In follow-up analysis, the newspaper discovered that more than 20 prisoners were returned to prison or had their sentences recalculated, yet they didn't appear on the Department of Corrections' official accounting to the governor and the public. Among those not disclosed: a man convicted of attempted murder of a police officer. He was out on parole 18 years before his correct release date.

While the breadth of the problem in Nebraska was dramatic, prison sentences are ripe for investigation everywhere. In calling other states, we learned of similar, systemic mistakes, though none as serious as the problems in Nebraska.

Investigate your state's DOC

Abuse the living crap out of the records that are available. We started this investigation off of an inmate roster. We looked to legislative transcripts to find a few other clues. Most prison records are under 19 layers of secrecy. But filtering that one record — the roster — through the lens of other public documents led us to scoops we never even expected.

Typical investigative stuff here, but find and ingratiate yourself with the critics. We've found sources by tracking down ex-employees and taking the temperature of legislators on the appropriate committees. We asked them what documentation to request, and struck gold.

Ask "Why?" Department employees know *how* things are done. But even they are bothered when they don't know why. And in a bureaucracy as layered as a prison system, chances are that motivation is rarely shared.

Even better, double-checking sentencing decisions falls right in the computer-assisted reporting wheelhouse. Sentences are interpreted by bureaucrats looking at rulings and laws handed down over the course of decades. As those elements are cobbled together over time, as they were in Nebraska, it's not a stretch to believe they could be misapplied. Checking them out boils down to basic math.

Predictably, backlash has extended to the highest reaches of state government. As one expert put it, government has two basic jobs: to keep the roads paved and to keep the bad guys away.

Nebraska failed on the latter.

In his 20-year newspaper career, Todd Cooper has worked for the Lincoln Journal Star, the St. Cloud (Minn.) Times and the Omaha World-Herald. At the World-Herald, he has written features and worked beats from the College World Series to City Hall, from cops to courts. He is in his 12th year covering legal issues for The World-Herald.

Matt Wynn is a reporter and developer focusing on government. He graduated from the Missouri School of Journalism in 2007 and worked in Missouri and Arizona before returning to his hometown paper.

Tracking the Debt

An exhaustive effort to document Detroit's economic decline

By Nathan Bomey and John Gallagher
Detroit Free Press

As the City of Detroit edged closer to an unprecedented bankruptcy filing in the spring of 2013, the Detroit Free Press committed significant resources to covering the story. A team of reporters from throughout the newsroom, including Metro, Features and Business, assembled with editors to plan coverage.

As a business reporter, Nathan Bomey's typical beat is General Motors. John Gallagher covers urban redevelopment efforts in the city. But bankruptcy is fundamentally a business story. Although many authors and journalists have chronicled the myriad reasons why the Motor City plunged from 1.8 million residents in the 1950s to fewer than 700,000 today, the Free Press identified a unique opportunity to deliver a creative forensic analysis of the city government's epic financial collapse — a tale that can only be told by reviewing decades of financial data, reviewing thousands of records and conducting numerous interviews.

In May 2013, we launched a three-month effort that culminated in the Sept. 15 publication of our 6,000-word report, "How Detroit Went Broke," in the Sunday Free Press and at Freep.com.

The end result was an overwhelming vindication of an exceedingly difficult project that was unlike any other we've tackled in our careers — and for one specific reason: Much of Detroit's financial history has been lost to time. Or so we thought initially.

Regina H. Boone | Detroit Free Press

Former Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick is seen here in 2013 entering a courthouse where he was convicted of racketeering and other charges. But it was a $1.4 billion debt deal his administration engineered in 2005 that turned out to be his biggest fiscal blunder.

The hunt for data

When we started our project — working under the direction of Free Press Managing Editor for Digital Media Nancy Andrews, Business Editor Christopher Kirkpatrick and Multimedia Art and Projects Director Eric Millikin — we immediately ran into a substantial hurdle. Accessing reliable data about Detroit's financial history is not a task for Google. In fact, we quickly discovered that the City of Detroit itself does not even maintain a publicly available collection of records regarding its financial history because it shuttered its City Hall library years ago for budgetary reasons. And as Detroit news media are well aware, the city is notorious for failing to adequately respond to even the most routine public records requests. In fact, Chapter 9 bankruptcy has revealed that Detroit is abysmal at record keeping, in part because of its dilapidated information technology systems.

After despairing at the lack of digital data and the inability to file a simple request to secure historical financial records, we went hunting for the data in the most traditional of locales: the Detroit Public Library.

Bomey spent a substantial portion of his day for several weeks combing through files in the Burton Historical Collection of the Detroit Public Library, which — as it turns out — maintains shelves of dusty records containing the city's annual financial audits. These records proved to be crucial to the project because they showed the city's actual revenue and debt — not the budgeted amounts, which can be deceiving.

With laptop in hand, Bomey analyzed the annual audits starting in 1960 and painstakingly created a database documenting the city's financial history, year by year. This database became key to analyzing what happened to the city's finances over the last half century. We compiled an exhaustive list of data — some of which we realized later we never needed — including total employees, taxes, expenditures, police and fire staffing, parks, pools and even "swimmobiles" (a portable metal tank that traveled from neighborhood to neighborhood for kids to take a dip).

With more than 30 columns of data, our graphics editor helped create an extensive series of internal preliminary charts — not designed for publication — to examine trends and understand the ebb and flow of the city's finances. What we discovered was a city that failed to respond adequately to plummeting revenue by leaning on a series of new taxes, failing to adequately cut expenses and eventually turning to debt to pay the bills.

As the city's property tax base shrunk, Detroit began adding new taxes — an income tax, a utility tax, a casino gaming tax — but revenue in today's dollars nonetheless fell 40 percent from 1962 to 2012. The total assessed value of Detroit property plummeted 77 percent over the last 50 years in inflation-adjusted dollars, but the city failed to cut the size of its government quickly enough to make up for the lack of revenue.

While Bomey was gathering data on the city's budget, Gallagher researched the city's incredibly complex and historically opaque pension fund records, also found only at the Detroit Public Library. He created a similar database of pension records, documenting the city's payments to retirees. It became clear that Detroit's two municipal pension systems, one for police and firefighters and one for non-uniformed workers, had been doling out bonus payments known as the "13th check" for many years. With the help of a fiscal analyst's report performed for City Council, the Free Press was able to estimate the cost of these bonus payments — nearly $1 billion over 25 years. When the foregone interest and appreciation was calculated, it became clear that the pension funds would have been perhaps $2 billion richer today had pension fund leaders not distributed exorbitant bonuses. That shortfall was now a major reason why the city faced financial turmoil.

Debt-driven demise

Through the course of reviewing the city's financial records — including digital documents available since 2002 — we also identified an ambitious 2005 financial transaction engineered by then-Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick as key to the city's insolvency. Mostly ignored at the time, the deal was designed to shore up the city's weakened pension funds. The city borrowed more than $1.4 billion in 2005 and put that money into its pension funds through a complex network of shell corporations established to circumvent the State of Michigan's legal limits on municipal borrowing.

The city then engaged in a so-called "swaps" agreement on interest rates that turned disastrous for the city when the global economy collapsed. The swaps were contracts that secured a steady interest rate of 6 percent on the $1.4 billion debt deal engineered to eliminate the city's unfunded pension liabilities. By purchasing the swaps, the city was protecting itself against the prospect of increasing interest rates. Instead, interest rates plummeted to near-zero during the Great Recession, sticking the city with a $50 million-per-year bill that consumed five percent of Detroit's general fund budget and helped drive the city into bankruptcy.

Naturally, a review of data is not enough to document a city's financial collapse. We supplemented our research with dozens of interviews with city officials and advisers who had been living with the city's financial challenges for decades, including then-Mayor Dave Bing and two former mayors, Dennis Archer and Roman Gribbs. (Kilpatrick, now imprisoned on racketeering charges, declined to answer questions for our report.)

Digital first

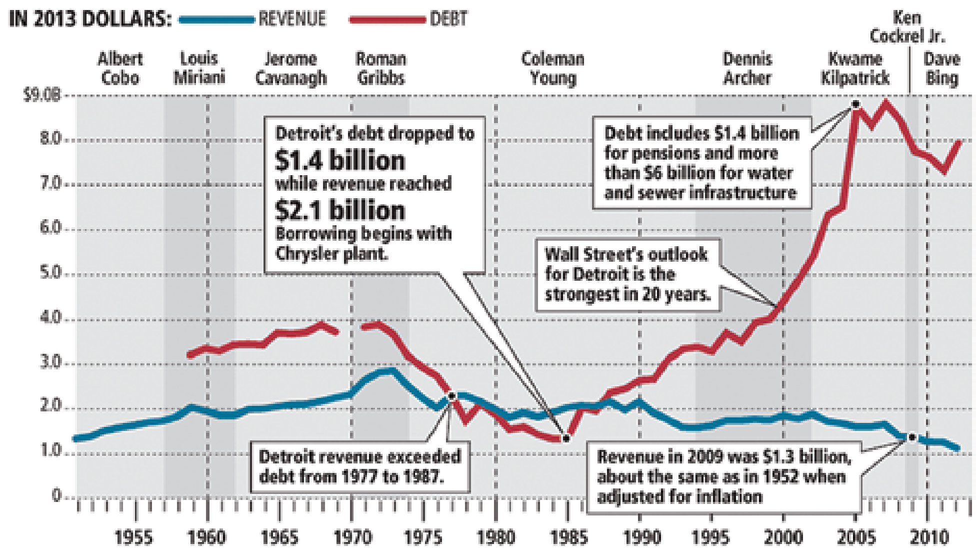
From the beginning of this reporting project, the Free Press took a "digital-first" approach in which the paper's graphics team, headed by Millikin, used the data compiled by the reporters to produce a series of online and print graphics that were stunning in their clarity and impact. For online readers, these graphics showed the city's mounting debt burden over the years, its dwindling revenues and other key indicators of growing financial trouble.

The final editing team included Andrews, Kirkpatrick, Managing Editor for News Nancy Laughlin and Editor and Publisher Paul Anger, the Free Press copy-editing staff and the two reporters — all engaging in a line-by-line reading of the lengthy project, honing it for clarity and impact. News Designer Tim Good crafted a powerful presentation that started with a large presence on the Sunday front-page and jumped to four full inside pages.

The reaction was swift. The piece generated extensive praise on social media, nearly 500

DETROIT'S DEBT EXPLODES IN 2000s

The city's revenue exceeded its debt for a decade starting in 1977 under Mayor Coleman Young. But when the city's bond rating improved in 1985, a surge of new borrowing began. Bonds were sold for many projects, including Chrysler's Jefferson North Assembly Plant, improvements to Cobo Center, water and sewer infrastructure and downtown redevelopment. Chart does not include future accrued liabilities such as pension, retiree health care or interest on bonds, which emergency manager Kevyn Orr says total $18 billion.

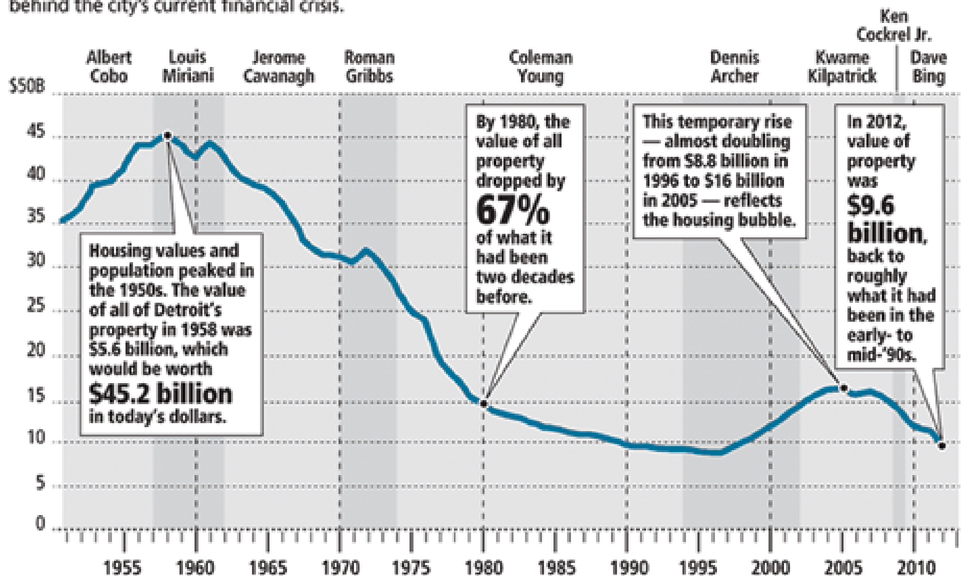


NOTE: All dollar amounts have been adjusted for inflation and are in 2013 dollars. 1970 debt records were unavailable. Debt includes total general obligation bonds; certificates of indebtedness and notes payable (general, not including water and sewers) through 1973; net direct debt after 1973, not including overlapping debt from 2006 to 2012; pension debt from 2005 to 2012.

SOURCE: Detroit's annual financial reports KOFI MYLER/DETROIT FREE PRESS

DETROIT PROPERTY VALUES PLUMMETED IN '60S AND '70S

The exodus of city residents, abandonment of homes and aging housing stock caused a dramatic plunge in assessed property values in Detroit and a corresponding drop in property-tax revenues. They are a core reason behind the city's current financial crisis.



NOTE: All dollar amounts have been adjusted for inflation and are in 2013 dollars.

SOURCE: Detroit's annual financial reports MOSES HARRIS/DETROIT FREE PRESS

Tony Spina | Detroit Free Press

Many Detroit area residents blame former Mayor Coleman Young for Detroit's demise, but a Detroit Free Press investigation into the city's financial collapse showed that Young was a fiscal conservative who helped stave off insolvency by implementing necessary cuts and avoiding debt. Young is seen here overlooking the Detroit skyline in 2001.

online comments and innumerable conversations about the true causes of Detroit's bankruptcy. The Washington Post's Ezra Klein called it "spectacular work," ProPublica named it one of the best pieces of investigative journalism in 2013 and David Cay Johnston heaped praise on the project.

Perhaps our greatest challenge was converting our data into a compelling narrative that would appeal to a wide swath of readers, provide fresh insight and affect the public conversation about municipal finances. Indeed, we have received communications from numerous public officials saying they learned a lot from reading our package. For example, former Indiana State Treasurer Richard Mourdock cited the report in meetings with the State Financial Officers Foundation.

"The clarity of the information you presented is outstanding," Mourdock told us in an email. "Swaps, certificates of participation and the consequences of credit ratings are complex and yet I know your readers were greatly educated by your work. As a summary for me, it was also excellent."

Municipal reporting tips

This project exposed how distressed municipalities can hide the depths of their financial disrepair through creative accounting methods and tricky borrowing schemes. Here are three

key recommendations for other reporters examining the health of local municipalities:

1. Pay close attention to how cities are recording their spending on legacy costs.

Where is the funding coming from? In Detroit, the city masked how much the retiree costs were sapping from the general fund. But a deeper look revealed that the city was shifting dollars out of its general fund into separate accounts to pay its pension costs, debt service and retiree health care. This left fewer dollars for basic services like police and fire protection. In Detroit, the city didn't even record the size of its retiree health care liabilities until 2007. That helped mask the pain of the city's union promises until it was probably too late to do anything.

2. Pay less attention to annual budget deficits.

Simply tracking budget deficits can be misleading. The city of Detroit had surpluses in many years in which its finances were still collapsing. A little bit of creative accounting allows cities to skew the numbers. It's more informative to cross-reference revenue, annual spending, debt loads and retiree costs. A simple pie chart can reveal how much the city is spending on legacy costs, including debt service, and whether it's consuming an increasing share of the city's normal budget. That's a sign of trouble.

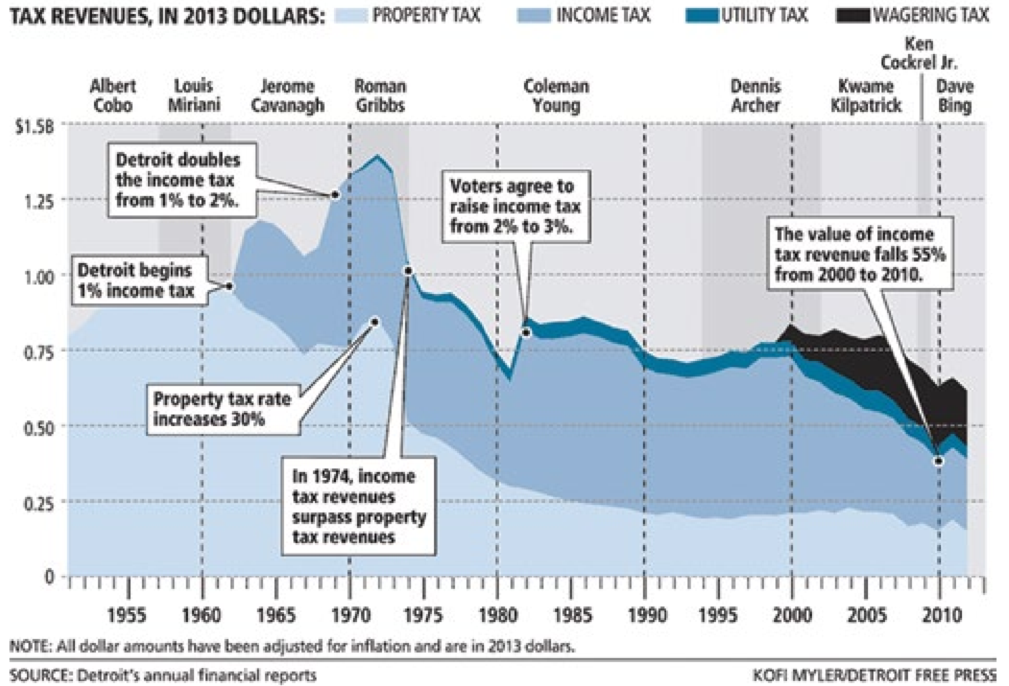
3. Examine the actions of independently operated pension funds.

Are they distributing bonuses? In Detroit, excess earnings were often distributed to pensioners instead of being reinvested to grow the overall fund. That compromised the health of the city budget because the city treasury had to make up any shortfall in the pension funds, money that couldn't go to other city services. It ultimately helped trigger the bankruptcy.

Finally, as journalists, we have a duty to closely examine city actions. But we also have a duty to relay our findings in an accessible way to readers. For our project, that means identifying simple anecdotes and delivering our findings in a straightforward way. Despite whatever digital trends confront our industry, that's a principle that will never become stale.

Nathan Bomey covers General Motors and Detroit's bankruptcy for the Detroit Free Press. He joined the Free Press in March 2012 after spending six years as a business reporter and editor for AnnArbor.com and the Ann Arbor Business Review. A 2014 Gerald Loeb Award finalist for Breaking News, Nathan is a political science and journalism graduate of Eastern Michigan University and a 2012 fellow in the East-West Center's China-U.S. Journalists Exchange.

John Gallagher is a veteran journalist and author whose book, "Reimagining Detroit: Opportunities for Redefining an American City," was named by the Huffington Post as among the best social and political books of 2010. His most recent book is "Revolution Detroit: Strategies for Urban Reinvention." John joined the Detroit Free Press in 1987 to cover urban and economic redevelopment efforts in Detroit and Michigan, a post which he still holds.



Why use DocumentCloud?

DocumentCloud
TURNING DOCUMENTS INTO DATA
DOCUMENTCLOUD.ORG

- In-depth analytical tools
- Secure collaboration
- Share with your audience in a meaningful way

Give your documents the power they deserve.

A service of Investigative Reporters & Editors.

www.documentcloud.org

RADIO FLYER

Broadening the Education Beat

Finding data and documents to dig past school board meetings

BY ALIA WONG — HONOLULU CIVIL BEAT

THINK ABOUT THE DAY OF A CHILD and all the scenarios that can play out. The kid wakes up, eats breakfast — or maybe not. Perhaps she hops on the bus to go to school and gets bullied on the way. She arrives at school. Is her teacher qualified? Is her teacher stressed?

The child learns. She eats lunch. She takes a test, maybe two. Maybe she plays sports after school. Will she get hurt? She goes home to do her homework. Does she know how to do it? What will happen at school the next day? Use your imagination to fill in the blanks. Give your child a name, a personality; maybe she has a learning disability, maybe English isn't her first language, maybe she's poor.

It goes without saying that the duty of schools and universities extends far beyond academics. At their core, educational institutions are responsible for making the world a more livable place. Yes, education is about instructing, but it's also about keeping people healthy and safe, building social and cultural awareness and instilling compassion. It's about leveling the playing field.

Schools need to be held accountable for all the moving parts that uphold these responsibilities — from the food students eat to the materials they read — and ensure that every pupil has access to the same outcomes.

But there are a lot of moving parts and a lot of students. Educational institutions are often giant bureaucracies, minefields of unfulfilled promises and ill-conceived policies. In some cases, no one is there to make sure these institutions remedy those wrongs. Perhaps no one is aware that there's a problem to begin with.

This is where we step in. As education reporters it is our duty to go beyond the reactionary stories and avoid covering schools superficially. We must be proactive in our coverage, dig deeper and connect the dots. Education is filled with opportunities for watchdog journalism — both in and out of the classroom. Here are some of the lessons I've learned from covering education in Hawaii, where educational inequality and intractable bureaucracies have left many kids struggling.

LEFT: Children at Keiki Care Center of Hawaii, a preschool in Pearl City.

PF Bentley | Civil Beat

Student-Centered Reporting

As an education reporter, I put the student at the center of everything I write about. Whether it's about administrative malfeasance or school attendance rates, every story asks: What is the student getting out of this? How does this affect future generations of students?

For those of you who are tasked with covering the K-12 and higher education beats, it can be tough to juggle both, but I try to go back and forth between the two areas, never lingering on one for too long at the expense of the other and often working on multiple stories at the same time. Because the two are so interrelated, I've realized that covering both gives me deeper insight into both systems that I wouldn't have had otherwise.

The advantage of investigating education is that there's an abundance of data to work with.

Take remediation rates. Remediation happens in college, but it's largely a reflection of shortcomings on the K-12 side of education. The same tactic applies to reporters like me who have to balance daily beat coverage and watchdog reporting.

Always have an eye on your investigative projects while taking care of the daily news. You can still chip away at an investigation even while you're immersed in your day-to-day work — sending out public records requests or crunching data, for example.

PF Bentley | Civil Beat

TOP: Teacher Cindy Reves with her students at McKinley High School in Honolulu.
BOTTOM: Children walk single file at Na Wai Ola Public Charter School in Mountain View, Hawaii.

Data Is Everywhere

The advantage of investigating education is that there's an abundance of data to work with — especially in this day and age, when the emphasis on data collection as an accountability tool is at an all-time high. Governments are increasingly using data to compare performance among students, schools, school districts and states.

New data sources include teacher evaluations and the U.S. Department of Education's College Affordability and Transparency Center. Oftentimes education agencies are disinclined to share the raw data — or to disclose that the data even exists. Check with school districts and universities to see what kinds of data and reports they produce.

Chances are they track everything from employment statistics to performance metrics as they correlate with demographic breakdowns. Sometimes these reports — along with audits and contracts — are on file and used internally but never actually released to the public. I wouldn't have known the Hawaii Department of Education was relying on private consultants to help reform underperforming schools had I not pestered the department for the information after hearing some teachers complain about one of the consultants.

I eventually discovered that the department spent $12.7 million during the 2012-13 school year on various private consultants without seeing much of an improvement in student performance. I've also found tons of useful data files online by simply doing an "advanced search" on Google and refining the search results to Excel files only.

Another resource I use regularly is Google Fusion Tables, a free web application that can be used to gather, visualize and share data tables. I've found the mapping function especially helpful, as it helps illustrate how a given metric — say, chronic student

absenteeism — correlates with geography and poverty.

The U.S. Department of Education is a useful resource for federal data. Its Office of Civil Rights, for example, compiles tons of data on education access and equity. These data tools not only save time, but they also give you a leg up in approaching officials who may be tight-lipped.

It's also useful to peruse the policies of a given school or university system. For example, I recently looked into the prevalence and handling of sexual assaults at the University of Hawaii to explore how, if at all, the national epidemic of sexual violence on college campuses is playing out here. I started by reviewing the university's sexual assault policies and comparing them with guidelines developed by organizations such as the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network. Discrepancies between the guidelines and the policies revealed potential shortcomings in the university's approach to sexual assaults.

That analysis helped delineate the sorts of issues and anecdotes I would highlight in the story. I eventually got my hands on

Teachers can be reluctant to speak to the media but they're often privy to heaps of useful information.

a case file that aptly illustrated the consequences of these policies. According to the documents, low-level, untrained administrators may have botched an investigation into a sexual assault that happened in a campus dorm. One administrator even emailed this note to residence staff, including the victim, shortly after the incident: "I wanted to let you know that (the perpetrator) is doing fine and we appreciate you giving him privacy over the last few weeks."

The email, a copy of which was included in the reports, then went on to explain that he would transfer to another building but keep his job as a resident advisor: "(The perpetrator) and I ask that you continue to respect his privacy and wish him well as he transitions into a new area/community. You are all friends, so please continue to be friends!"

Although the perpetrator was found guilty, he was living on campus at least a month later. The sexual assault story also offers a lesson in how to report on topics for which little reliable data exists and how to work around constraints such as FERPA. Sexual violence is inherently hard to quantify because so few victims report the assault to authorities. Just 12 percent of college victims report their assault to law enforcement officials, according to the Department of Justice. And some universities will argue that sexual assault records are confidential because of privacy laws.

PF Bentley | Civil Beat

Students at University of Hawaii- Manoa campus in February.

This is where anecdotal evidence — on top of the policy analysis — and alternative information sources really come in handy. In this case, I reached out to advocacy groups, including one that shared with me a wealth of documentation related to sexual assault investigations in which it was directly involved. That documentation included email correspondence, meeting transcripts and video footage.

Lastly, it's important to read between the lines in data sets. Don't solely rely on overall averages to tell a story. Look at medians and discrepancies. I recently wrote a story about differences in federal loan default rates across Hawaii's college campuses, thanks to a tip I got from a fellow reporter who noticed anomalies in the state's data. As a whole, Hawaii's 2010 loan default rate is quite low compared to the national average: 9 percent versus 15 percent. But a closer look at the data revealed great variation among individual campuses. Although 12 percent of the students at one community college defaulted on their loans, at another 29 percent defaulted. The disparities themselves made for a worthwhile story.

Tap All Resources

Teachers can be reluctant to speak to the media but they're often privy to heaps of useful information. If they're wary of talking on the record, ask them for documentation — internal emails, for example — that can corroborate what they're disclosing. Reticent teachers can also facilitate connections, leading reporters to their more outspoken colleagues.

Tips rarely appear out of thin air. The best stories and commentary often stem from relationships and conversations with real people who have a personal stake in the issues: parents, teachers, students.

Network with parent groups and grassroots coalitions and pay attention to sites such as Facebook, Twitter and reddit; social media can prove particularly fruitful when seeking student input for a story. Make yourself visible, and have as many in-person interviews as possible. Don't just attend board meetings and legislative hearings. Get out into the community and find the people who matter.

Alia Wong covers education at Honolulu Civil Beat, the largest news outlet dedicated to public-affairs reporting about Hawaii. She recently won two national awards from the Education Writers Association for her reporting, including first place for beat reporting. Born and raised in Hawaii, Alia joined Civil Beat as a full-time staff reporter in 2012 after graduating from Boston University with degrees in journalism and Latin American studies.

Tracking Charter Finance

Watchdogging nation's largest public subsidy for new charter schools

BY DAN MIHALOPOULOS AND PAUL SALTZMAN – CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

THERE'S A LOT OF MONEY to be had running charter schools — privately run, government-funded alternatives to public schools, which some parents prefer for their children.

Politicians, unable to cure all that ails the nation's schools, have embraced them as a way to appease unhappy parents. And charter operators have sprung up and grown rapidly in response.

You can debate the merits of putting taxpayers' money into these alternatives. And you can argue about whether they do any better than traditional schools. But one fact is unassailable: More government money is being spent on these privately operated schools each year. That makes them a ripe subject for investigation.

This is particularly true in Illinois. Hundreds of millions of dollars are spent each year to operate charter schools in Chicago, where charters are now responsible for one in seven of all public school students. And in 2009, state legislators and the governor decided to make what was touted as the nation's largest public investment in charter schools: a $98 million construction grant to Chicago's United Neighborhood Organization.

With help from a who's who of Illinois and Chicago political powerhouses, this Hispanic community activist group established what became one of the state's largest network of charter schools.

We wanted to examine public financing of charter schools — especially in light of the money troubles the state of Illinois and the city of Chicago's school system faced. This whopping state grant to UNO offered tantalizing possibilities.

The way we went after this story from the start was aiming to answer one key question: How was UNO spending its record grant? We had reason to suspect the answers would provide plenty of fodder for stories, especially given the players involved:

- Illinois House Speaker Michael Madigan, perhaps the state's most powerful politician and chief sponsor of the UNO grant legislation
- Gov. Pat Quinn
- Former Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley, whose school board had approved and funded the first UNO schools
- Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, under whom the UNO network and other charter school operators found continued and growing financial support

And then there was Juan Rangel, UNO's longtime chief executive. Over the years, he'd built a strong political base for the organization — and a high profile for himself. His status was reflected in his car's license plates, which read "PATRON" (Spanish for "boss").

Sun-Times Library Photos

Before he resigned, UNO CEO Juan Rangel with Mayor Rahm Emanuel in 2012.

Steering UNO into the charter school business gave Rangel and the organization an even bigger platform, as the schools attracted a growing number of students from Latino families on the city's Southwest Side and Northwest Side. The gleaming, futuristic new UNO school buildings funded with the state grant rose in working-class, immigrant neighborhoods of modest brick bungalows, even as the Chicago Public Schools closed a record number of traditional schools.

Where we started

Our investigation of how the new charter schools were built began with a public records request to the state Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, which oversaw the grant to UNO.

Officials there hadn't looked into the companies the charter network was bringing in to work on the schools. But they had amassed a trove of receipts detailing how every penny had been spent. UNO was required, under the grant, to turn in those documents every few months. Receipts for the construction of a school with the first $25 million from the state filled a banker's box, which we reviewed.

CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 4, 2013 | Late Sports Final A WRAPPORTS COMPANY $1 City/Burbs $2 Elsewhere | 22º 11º ROUGH Page 40

CLOUT IN SESSION

UNO chief Juan Rangel (left) defends handing out millions in school contracts to friends and family of those in his organization

DAN MIHALOPOULOS & TIM NOVAK REPORT | THE WATCHDOGS, 6-8

THAT'S SO RAVENS

Baltimore tops San Francisco for Super Bowl XLVII triumph

GAME COVERAGE IN SPORTS | SHOW COVERAGE IN PULSE

THE DAILY SPLASH

PAPER TRAIL

Tech entrepreneur Mark Tebbe is ditching his hard copies and going digital PAGE 18

CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2013 | Late Sports Final A WRAPPORTS COMPANY $1 City/Burbs $2 Elsewhere | 39º 28º OVERACHIEVING Page 42

CLOUT IN SESSION

A WATCHDOGS REPORT

UNO LOOKS OUT FOR NO. 1 POL

Contractors and friends of clout-heavy charter schools ante up cash for state's top lawmaker, Michael Madigan

DAN MIHALOPOULOS REPORTS, 10-11

Illinois House Speaker Michael Madigan, in a Facebook photo from a UNO groundbreaking in 2012.

FIRST LADY'S OSCAR SURPRISE

PAGES 18-24

SPORTS

HAWKS' STREAK HITS 18

PAGES 62-63

HISTORY-MAKING JUSTICE DIES

PAGE 43

CHICAGO SUN-TIMES.com

TUESDAY, JUNE 3, 2014 | $1 City/Burbs $2 Elsewhere | A WRAPPORTS Company | Late Sports Final | 82° 57° AMBITION Page 42

POLITICS EARLY&OFTEN

SEC OFFICIAL:

'WE'RE NOT DONE'

Feds accuse clout-heavy charter-school network of 'making materially misleading statements' to bond investors STORY BY DAN MIHALOPOULOS, PAGE 7

BLACKHAWKS: WHAT WENT WRONG

LAZERUS IN SPORTS

POLITICS EARLY&OFTEN

CITY HONORS ON WAY FOR BYRNE?

SNEED, PAGES 4-5

2 BOYS AMONG 6 SHOT AT SOUTH SHORE LAUNDROMAT

PAGE 10

VIDEO WITH A VIEW

Carpentersville man shows off his backyard bee colony, after persuading town officials to overturn a ban.

tv.suntimes.com

State officials balked at producing receipts for the other schools built with the grant funds. To narrow our request, so it would no longer be seen as unduly burdensome, we asked only for the "G702" and "G703" documents that UNO had filed. These are common construction project documents that summarize how much has been paid to contractors and how much is owed, including change orders. With those records, we were able to compute how much taxpayer money went to contractors.

The records listed many UNO insiders as main contractors on the state-funded school projects. Among those who profited were the sister of the lobbyist who landed the grant, the brothers of a lawmaker who voted for the grant and, most significantly, two brothers of Miguel d'Escoto – Rangel's second-in-command at UNO.

The state hadn't required UNO to use sealed bidding to award those school-construction contracts, as public schools or any other unit of government would have to do. But the grant contract included a clause requiring UNO to disclose any deals that could be viewed as posing a conflict of interest. UNO hadn't done that for any of the insider deals.

Within days of our initial reports, d'Escoto resigned his $200,000-a-year job, and Quinn's administration opened an investigation into whether UNO had violated the conflict-of-interest provision. That led to a temporary suspension of the state grant and a permanent freeze that cost UNO $15 million.

Getting past hurdles

The UNO schools, like all charter schools, are part of the public school system in Chicago, getting tens of millions of dollars a year in operating funds from the Chicago Public Schools system. Yet UNO refused to provide records that any public school system would be forced to disclose upon request.

In Illinois, as in many states, publicly funded charter schools are subject to open records laws. But UNO argued it isn't subject to the law because it created a separate organization — the UNO Charter School Network, housed in the same offices, run by the same people — to win charter approval and funding from the city schools. The charter network then hired UNO to run the schools and turned over a large chunk of the money in rent and management fees to the community group's accounts.

In Illinois, as in many other states, publicly funded charter schools are subject to open records laws.

When UNO refused to release records, the Sun-Times appealed to the attorney general's office, which is the first step in Illinois to file a challenge in an open records dispute. Noting that both UNO entities are based in the same location and that both were headed by the same people, the attorney general sided with the Sun-Times and issued a "binding" ruling a year ago. It ordered the group to turn over the requested records, including those of its payments to Springfield lobbyists who helped land the construction grant. Instead, UNO filed an appeal in state court, where the case is ongoing.

Despite UNO's refusal to release records, we managed to get many internal UNO documents through sources. Those leaked records documented that Rangel hired his own family members on the taxpayers' dime, spent $143,000 on fireworks and a laser-light show for one school's grand opening gala and used Chicago Public Schools funds to pay contractors with insider connections.

Exposing political ties

As a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization, UNO isn't allowed under federal law to back candidates for public office. So Rangel instead would give what he termed his "personal endorsement" to candidates including Emanuel, who called on him to co-chair his 2011 mayoral campaign.

The series showed that Rangel urged contractors on UNO's state-funded school projects to make campaign contributions to elected officials who delivered the grant.

Our examination of nominating petitions for political candidates turned up evidence of UNO employees doing campaign grunt work, gathering signatures to get on the ballot, for UNO's political allies — work Rangel said was done in their free time.

UNO's ties touched virtually all of the most powerful figures in state and Chicago politics. With one story about Madigan's ties to UNO, we were able to run a front-page photo of the smiling Illinois House Speaker sporting a baseball cap emblazoned with the organization's name.

Continuing fallout

After the first stories ran and its grant was suspended, UNO won a brief, temporary restoration of funding by promising reforms. Those included the appointment of a new board chairman. Gov. Quinn's administration, which had suspended funding, restored it to complete a half-built school that was due to open in three months.

Brian Jackson | Sun-Times

The UNO Soccer Academy was one of the charter schools built with a state school-construction grant that has been heavily scrutinized.

We used city "minority-business enterprise" program records to reveal that the new UNO chairman had extensive connections to the most powerful member of the City Council — Rangel's close ally. The new chairman stepped aside in less than three months, citing a difference of philosophy and mission.

It was critical to this investigation to examine documents related to UNO's borrowing of tens of millions of dollars more through bond issues. The deals required UNO to report a great deal about its finances. Those documents are archived on the EMMA (Electronic Municipal Market Access) website of the Municipal Securities Rulemaking Board, emma.msrb.org. For any investigation that involves a charter operator that's borrowed money through this approach, you need to check for all filings on the EMMA site.

Our early stories prompted bond investors to demand answers about UNO's contracting practices. We learned about these concerns by listening to a conference call between the bond investors and Rangel. A recording of the call was archived at the EMMA website.

Rangel's comments in that recording later were cited by the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, which sanctioned UNO for not disclosing all the insider deals that we exposed to bond investors. In a civil complaint against UNO that was unsealed in federal court in Chicago recently, the SEC made clear that our stories had prompted its probe.

"The Sun-Times article raised high-profile allegations that called into question UNO's principal source of funds . . . and raised the prospect of administrative and criminal investigations," the SEC said in the complaint.

UNO settled the allegations that it had misled and defrauded bond investors by agreeing to accept federal oversight of its contracting. By then, Rangel had resigned from his $250,000-a-year job at UNO, a post he had held for 17 years.

All of the schools are open and operating. But an SEC official said recently the investigation is ongoing: "We're not done yet. With regard to other parties that may have contributed to UNO's securities violations, the investigation continues. So charges against others, including individuals, are possible." The Internal Revenue Service also began an audit, according to documents that UNO's school network posted on the EMMA site last month.

This proves, again, the importance of following the money. When politicians fall all over themselves to help a group, it pays to look at who's benefiting — including the politicians.

Schools are as influenced by political considerations as any arm of government. Charter schools are no different. Most rely almost entirely on public money. It can pay off for anyone covering them to go beyond education policy issues and also examine how the money is spent, just as you would do in covering city hall or any other government beat.

Dan Mihalopoulos has been a staff reporter for the Chicago Sun-Times since 2012, focusing on investigative projects. A Chicago native and 1996 graduate of the Missouri School of Journalism, he previously covered Chicago City Hall for the Chicago Tribune and the Chicago News Cooperative and also worked for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. His stories about the United Neighborhood Organization's charter schools won the national Education Writers Association's first prize for investigative reporting and the Chicago Headline Club's Watchdog Award.

Paul Saltzman edits investigative projects for the Sun-Times.

Standards and Stories

Push politicians for a real conversation about Common Core

BY SARAH BUTRYMOWICZ — THE HECHINGER REPORT

IT'S A BUZZ TOPIC that politicians have taken hold of during the campaign season, but few are digging deep beyond the talking points. Classrooms around the country are changing. Teachers are shifting the way or the order in which they teach things. Kids are bringing home new kinds of assignments, some that are bewildering to parents. Most states are prepping to administer annual standardized tests online.

It's all thanks to the Common Core State Standards, a set of skills a student should have in math and English Language Arts from kindergarten through high school graduation. After two years of development, Common Core was unveiled in 2010 and rapidly — and without fanfare — adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia. Minnesota adopted just the English Language Arts strand. Architects of the standards say that they will help American students compete globally and are typically more rigorous than what states had in place before.

But as the standards have hit classrooms, pushback from many parents and politicians has been fierce. Indiana, Oklahoma, North Carolina, Missouri and South Carolina have passed bills repealing the standards. Similar legislation has been introduced in at least 14 other states, although it frequently stalls in committee.

Critics question whether the standards are as demanding as claimed. Many, particularly conservatives, have also framed Common Core as a states' rights issue, arguing the standards represent overreach by the federal government.

The Obama administration never explicitly told states to adopt Common Core. But it was an early, vocal supporter. Adopting the "college- and career-ready standards" also increased states' chances of winning money in the 2010 Race to the Top grant competition, and of earning a waiver from the No Child Left Behind universal proficiency sanctions that were due to kick in this year. Most states took this to mean they needed to adopt Common Core, but Virginia developed its own standards that the U.S. Department of Education says has met the criteria.

It's worth noting that many teachers say they like the standards but have concerns that they may be evaluated on how students fare on new Common Core-aligned exams. The country's two national teachers unions have tempered their support for the standards because of how they have been implemented.

Jackie Mader | The Hechinger Report

Laurie Langford, a second grade teacher at West Defuniak Elementary, helps two students look for evidence in a reading passage about public sector jobs.

It's still too early to say whether Common Core will achieve its goal of radically improving American education and there is little data to back up either side. In fact, just two states — New York and Kentucky — have tested under the new standards so far. As was expected, test scores plummeted. Even with a lack of data, though, there are important questions to ask during the rollout.

Are classrooms changing and how?

In theory, Common Core was meant to revolutionize classrooms. Teachers would have to overhaul lessons. Students would be asked to learn how to solve math problems in whole new ways and spend days dissecting texts that may have only taken one period before. And in some places, that's what's happening.

In others, classes look largely like they did three years ago. Try to find concrete differences between the way a concept or text is being taught now and how it was taught three years ago. You could ask for old lesson plans, if they still have them, to compare them to new ones. Don't forget to ask schools and districts for the required reading lists.

What curriculums are schools using to teach Common Core? Who designed it and who vetted it?

Be wary of conflating standards and curriculum. Anyone who wants to can slap the words "Common Core-aligned" on a textbook and shop it around to school districts. But remember, standards just mean a student should be able to do a particular thing, like solve a word problem using multiplication. The quality of the word problem is up to those who design the curriculum. Many examples of fairly nonsensical Common Core assignments have gone viral and opponents have used them as fodder. Ask questions about how your district is — or isn't — attempting to develop quality control in a completely unregulated market.

Jackie Mader | The Hechinger Report

Student work in the hallway of a Mississippi elementary school shows the "partial product" method of solving a multiplication problem. The new Common Core standards emphasize multiple ways of solving problems.

What for-profits are cashing in on the changes?

For-profit companies are flooding the market with Common Core-aligned books, apps and teacher training sessions. If your school or district is buying from an outside company, instead of creating an in-house curriculum, dig into how much the organization is making off of these deals and how qualified it is to be making these products.

Will new, computer-based tests pass muster?

Although technically a separate issue, you can't talk about the standards without talking about the new tests that come with them. When states adopted Common Core, they joined one of two consortia: Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium or Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers. These groups were in charge of developing computer-based tests that would, in theory, go beyond traditional multiple-choice and short-answer questions. Each group has released sample questions online so you can judge for yourself how well they did this.

Support for the testing consortia has weakened significantly. PARCC in particular has lost more than a dozen members. States have pulled out citing concerns about the amount of time testing requires and the cost of the exams. But these places still need new exams. They'll either be making their own or working with new providers, like the ACT. Regardless of which test maker your state is using, there are uncertainties about the quality of exams and whether schools will have the necessary technology to use them.

How much data will be collected?

One of the biggest non-academic gripes about Common Core is its connection to increased data collection of students from early education through higher education. Again, this is really a separate issue. Adoption of Common Core requires no additional data collection. But the Obama administration has called for states to adopt better student data systems, and the Council of Chief State School Officers, which co-holds the copyright for Common Core with the National Governor's Association, is developing a preschool to college model. As a result, many opponents have grouped data mining and the standards together, claiming the proposed systems would violate student privacy laws.

General tips

As with any controversial topic, there's a lot of misinformation about Common Core flying around. Some people have claimed Common Core requires sexual education be taught to kindergarteners (it doesn't) or that it forces teaching a socialist agenda (also not true). Other claims are a little harder to parse, with experts on both sides weighing in. Are the standards developmentally appropriate in the early grades? Are they really benchmarked against those of high performing countries? When in doubt, go to the source: read the standards. Read the arguments on both sides. Ask people you talk to, both for and against, what specifically they like or don't like.

As Common Core becomes an even hotter issue this election year, press politicians to go deeper than their talking points. Ask what standard(s) they have a problem with. What in fourth grade math or eighth grade ELA is problematic? And ask what they think their states should use in place of Common Core. They'll likely say something like, Utah students deserve Utah standards or say that several states had high standards before Common Core and they could serve as models, but ask that extra question. Indiana dropped Common Core, but the state standards they have now are remarkably similar to it.

And, whenever possible, get into classrooms. Talk to the teachers and students who are affected by this change the most. See what the curriculum looks like and how kids are responding to it. Odds are good that your audience — if they've even heard of Common Core, which many Americans still haven't — don't know what it really means for a third grader in California or a high school student in Florida. Cutting through the academic jargon and political rhetoric to explain that can be a huge service to your community.

Sarah Butrymowicz is a staff writer for The Hechinger Report. Her work has appeared in The Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times, as well as on Time.com and NBCNews.com. She was the winner of the 2012 New York Press Club's Nellie Bly Cub Reporter Award. She received a bachelor's degree from Tufts University and an M.S. from Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism.

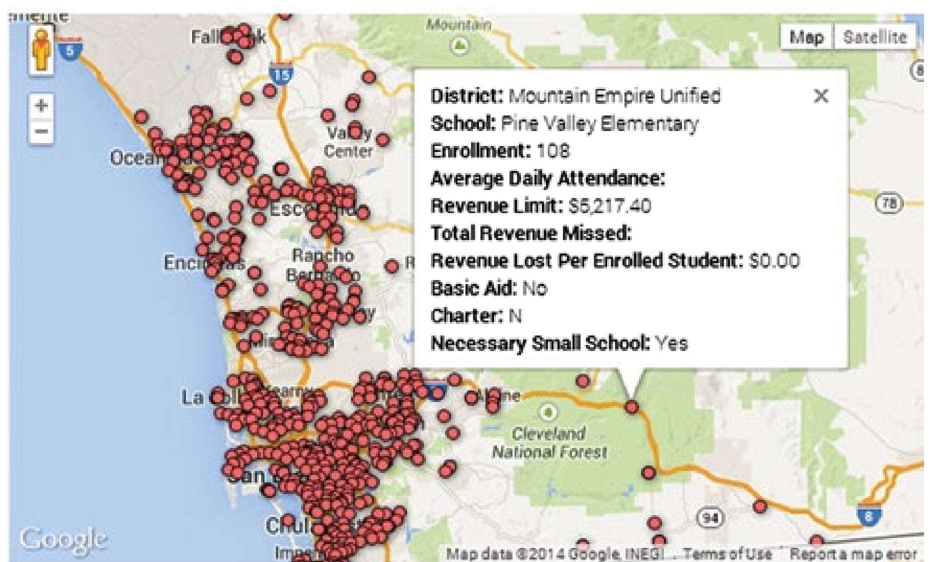
It's Not on the Test

Investigating education data beyond test scores

BY MEREDITH BROUSSARD, TEMPLE UNIVERSITY; AND COULTER JONES, THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WHEN YOU THINK "education data," your next thought is probably "standardized test scores." Although test scores can be fascinating and illuminating, plenty of other data sets in and around schools can be fruitful for an investigative journalist. Here are nine ideas for finding data-driven education stories that go beyond test scores.

1. Location. Location. Location. Geography can affect quality of life. How does the environment around the school affect the students? Map school locations onto another data set to see if there are any problematic proximities. The Center for Investigative Reporting's series, "On Shaky Ground," exposed structural problems at schools located near fault lines or earthquake hazards. Investigative Post, a Buffalo, New York-based reporting team, looked at asthma rates in schools near air pollution sites. Coulter Jones' team at WNYC looked at whether kids were getting hit by cars going to and from school in New York City. Pedestrian accidents are particularly important: motor vehicle accidents are one of the leading causes of death for children, according to CDC data (1.usa.gov/VRaK5B).



inewsource

Using school attendance data, KPBS and inewsource revealed that student absences at traditional, non-charter schools cost 21 San Diego area districts at least $102 million in revenue funding.

2. Check whether the school has enough books. This is especially relevant at schools that do not perform well on standardized tests, schools with high populations of low-income students and schools with large ESL populations. If the kids don't have books, or the digital equivalent, they can't learn. For an example of how missing books can affect an entire district, look at Meredith Broussard's story "Why Poor Schools Can't Win at Standardized Testing" in The Atlantic. The basic equation: for each subject in each grade, is the number of books equal to the number of kids in the school? You can also use a school's book inventory system to check whether the school has enough materials for its special needs students. Educators who work with visually impaired students report that it can take weeks or months for Braille editions of textbooks to arrive in cash-strapped districts. You can do a story at the beginning of the school year checking whether the number of Braille textbooks is equal to the number of kids who need them.

You can also use a school's book inventory system to check whether the school has enough materials for its special needs students.

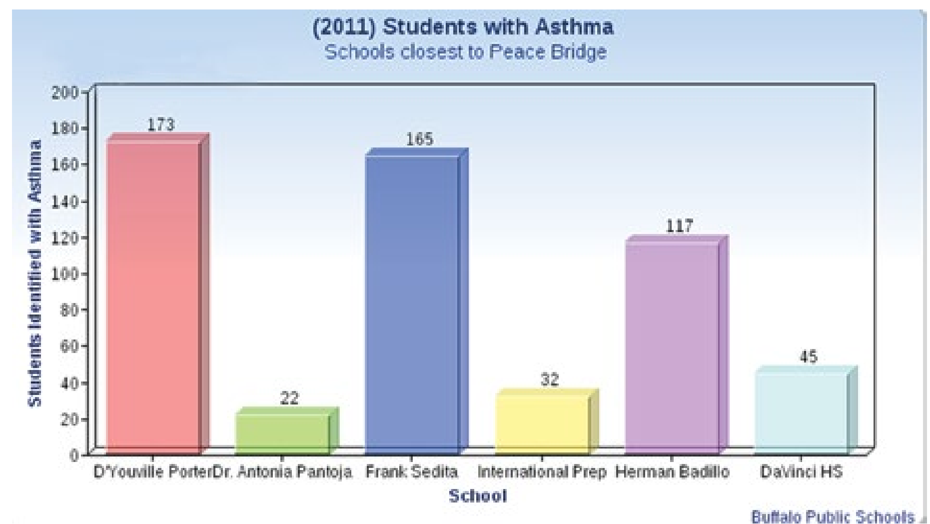
3. Does the school know where its technology is? With initiatives around mobile technology and hi-tech computer labs on the rise in many states, a lot of expensive equipment is sitting around in schools. It often disappears. Request the inventory list at the beginning and end of the school year, look at the difference and see if there's anything interesting. Or, if the local controller has audited the school district lately, ask to see the results. If you cover a school that touts its one-to-one laptop program, check whether the number of laptops is actually equal to the number of kids and teachers.

4. Is a felon driving the school bus? This story is an IRE/NICAR classic. Redo it every couple of years. Get a list of employees and job titles from your local school district and check the names against public records to see if any of the bus drivers (or other school employees) are convicted felons. Be careful of duplicate names — this is the tricky bit of this story.

5. Who's in class? Funding often corresponds to the number of students enrolled in public schools. The same applies to grants received for certain programs at private schools. Who and how many students are in class matters. In San Diego, inewsource showed how low attendance cost area school districts millions of dollars in funding. Get the actual raw data by school and by day of the actual students in attendance. Check for incongruities or anomalies. Are those signs of a social trend or fudged numbers? For private or charter schools, check stated enrollment against the school building's capacity. Is the school over-reporting enrollment that it couldn't possibly have?

6. Inspect the buildings. Every building has to be inspected by someone. Find out who it is and request the data. What form has to be filled out? How do problems get reported and how long does it take to fix them? Look for common problems like mold, rodents, roof leaks and construction code violations. Do these problems occur in disproportionate numbers in certain areas of the city? If so, why?

7. When is lunch and who is serving it? Childhood nutrition is increasingly in focus. When it comes to school lunches, however, many districts still suffer from the same constraints: time and money. Who has the food service contract and what is budgeted per meal? What are the health guidelines and is the provider meeting those guidelines? When students are eating can matter, too. Overcrowding has lead some districts to spread the lunch period over several hours, with some students eating lunch well before midday hour.



Dan Telvock | Investigative Post

Investigative Post pulled numbers on asthmatic students in schools near the Peace Bridge where six million cars, trucks and buses cross annually.

If a school district resists a reasonable open records request, write a story about the denial.

8. Know your rights. At some point, you may be denied access to education data on the basis of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, or FERPA. It is often cited and often misunderstood. FERPA prohibits schools from disclosing students' "protected information" to a third party. However, what qualifies as "protected information" has been litigated extensively and often. Schools are generally permitted to release "directory information," such as a student's name, address and telephone number. They are not permitted to release "educational information," such as student transcripts or GPAs, without permission. Good online resources can be found courtesy of the Society of Professional Journalists' "Reporters Guide to FERPA" (bit.ly/1opUpvG) as well as the Berkman Center for Internet & Society's Student Privacy Initiative, which commissioned an overview of student privacy data from the Harvard Law School's Cyberlaw Clinic. FERPA has been used to deny access to parking records, football game videos, swim meet score sheets and all kinds of public records. The Students Press Law Center's FERPA Fact blog (ferpafact.tumblr.com) keeps track of public records requests that have been denied on the basis of FERPA and fact-checks (read: rates) the truthiness of the denial.

9. Missing data can be a story. When data doesn't exist, don't despair: turn its absence into a story. If a school district resists a reasonable open records request, write a story about the denial. Don't know who the power players in the room are at an important school policy meeting? Take a page from NPR's "Dollar Politics" project and shoot photos of the audience, then ask your readers to identify the people in the shot. Then, look up those folks' lobbying expenditures or income from education-related contracts. Occasionally, you'll find that a school's policy says that data on a subject should be maintained; however, that data may not exist. The fact that a school isn't following its own rules is always a story.

Meredith Broussard is a 2012 USC/Annenberg Getty Foundation Arts Journalism Fellow and a winner of the 2012 Civic Data Challenge. She is an assistant professor in the Department of Journalism at Temple University.

Coulter Jones is an investigative reporter specializing in data analysis. In that role, he is currently working with The Wall Street Journal and has worked for WNYC, The Center for Investigative Reporting and newspapers in Pennsylvania.

Digging for Salary Data

Superintendents' contracts reveal additional perks

BY KELLY HINCHCLIFFE, WRAL.COM

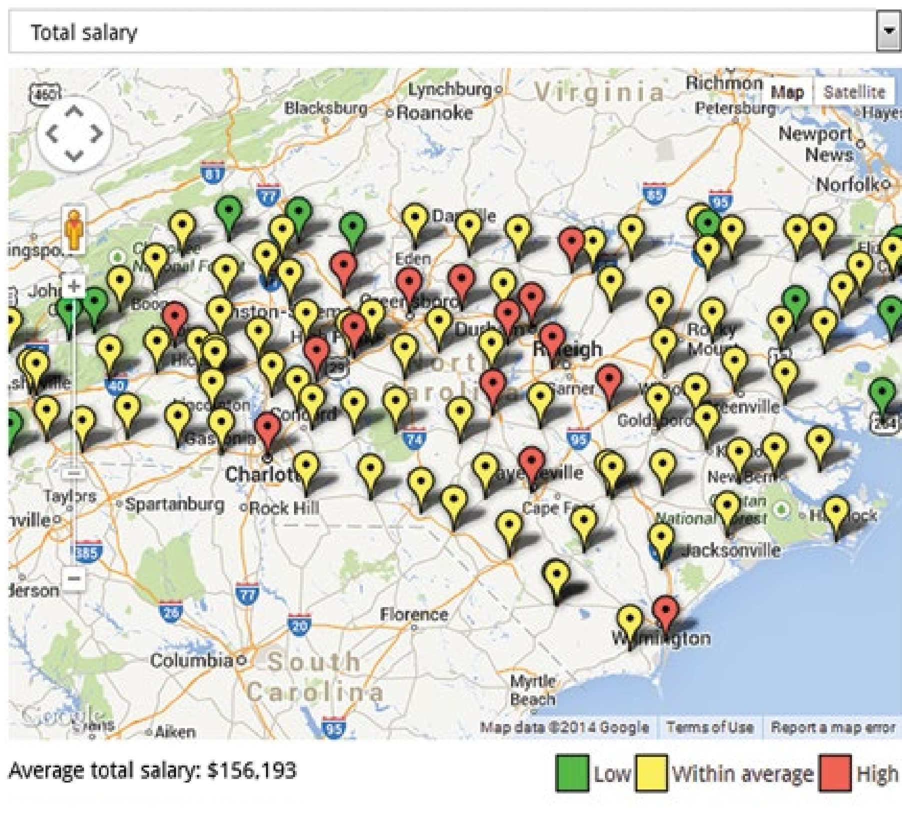
WHAT IF I TOLD YOU that a public school superintendent in North Carolina makes $134,000 a year? Not surprising, right? Now what if I told you that same superintendent asked the school board to give her a house and install a nearly $4,300 fence for her dogs, all paid for with taxpayer money? That's a story.

That's one of the nuggets I dug up last year after I requested contracts for all 115 public school superintendents in North Carolina. I could have simply asked for the school leaders' salaries and compared them that way, but it wouldn't have told the whole story.

Contracts are wonderful public records, filled with details that go beyond what is written on a paycheck. In the case of the superintendents, I found that some received thousands of dollars in bonuses, extra vacation days, cars, gym memberships, security details, moving expenses and money for mortgage payments.

Several years ago, I did a similar story and requested contracts for every coach and athletic director in the University of North Carolina system. Not surprisingly, I learned that coaches can receive extra pay based on their team's performance. But seeing the numbers broken down by coach, sport and school was illuminating.

With the superintendent story, the most difficult part was collecting the 115 contracts from school systems across the state. I tried getting them all from the state Board of Education, but some of their records were outdated or missing pages. I asked the school systems to send me electronic copies, but most were given to me on paper. But that



Using Google Fusion Tables, WRAL.com created an interactive map of each superintendent's salary in the state of North Carolina.

WRAL-TV

wasn't the worst part. Some schools delayed sending me the contracts. Others demanded to know why I wanted the records or simply denied my request. It took me a month to finally collect all of the contracts.

From there, the project involved a huge amount of analysis. I read through every contract — more than 1,300 pages total — and entered key information into Excel so I could do more detailed analysis. Among the findings:

- The average North Carolina superintendent makes about $156,000 a year and oversees a district with about 12,500 students.
- Charlotte-Mecklenburg and Wake County school systems have the highest paid superintendents in the state — at $288,000 and $275,000 per year, respectively.
- Wake County's superintendent makes the least amount of money per student – $1.83. Hyde County's superintendent makes the most — $205.80 per student.
- Higher salaries don't necessarily mean better benefits. For example, Dare County, a small coastal county, gave its new superintendent an extensive benefits package totaling more than $20,000 that covered her house hunting trips, moving expenses and helped pay for her old house in Virginia and her new house in Dare County.

I used Excel, DocumentCloud, Google Fusion Tables and Caspio quite extensively for this project. I scanned and uploaded the contracts to DocumentCloud and annotated each page so viewers could easily find the highlights.

My colleague, Tyler Dukes, helped me build an interactive map using Google Fusion Tables so viewers had another way of finding contracts by school system. We color-coded the map to show the high, middle and low ranges of salaries, including local and state supplements.

I used Caspio to create a database for our readers, which allowed them to sort by school system, superintendent, salary, enrollment or pay per student. They could then click on a superintendent's name to drill down and see a synopsis of that person's contract or get a link to the full contract in DocumentCloud.

As a result of my story, a local school board asked for an audit of its administrators' contracts and found that they had received large pay raises and contract extensions without the approval of the full school board. The superintendent resigned as a result.

NC superintendents' contracts packed with perks

Posted August 26, 2013
Updated August 30, 2013
588 96 Share 0

RALEIGH, N.C. — North Carolina superintendents are among the highest paid public school employees in the state, but their six-figure salaries aren't the only way they're compensated. Many receive thousands of dollars in bonuses each year, and some get special perks, such as cars, gym memberships, money for mortgage payments and extra vacation time.

WRAL.com took each county's enrollment data and analyzed it against superintendents' salaries.
WRAL.com

The best result of the story, in my opinion, was the outpouring of comments, tweets, emails, etc., from readers who thanked us for the story and for posting all of the contracts. Before our story, this information was not available in one place anywhere else.

My best advice to journalists hoping to do a similar project would be to get help from colleagues, if possible. I underestimated the amount of time this project would take and spent weeks requesting the contracts, collecting them from various sources, scanning and uploading them and then finally reading through every contract. After that, I still had to do interviews, report the story and work on the technical aspects of how I wanted the contracts displayed online.

If you're a reporter, hopefully you've already requested a spreadsheet of public employees' salaries on your beat. I encourage you to take it one step further and find out who has a contract and request it. I think you'll be surprised by what you find. I know I was.

Kelly Hinchcliffe is an investigative reporter at WRAL.com in Raleigh, where she has worked for seven years. She previously worked as an education reporter at The Herald-Sun in Durham, N.C., and The Frederick News-Post in Frederick, Md. Kelly is passionate about public records and writes a blog called Public Records Geek. You can follow her on Twitter @RecordsGeek.

Immunization Investigation

Prying the state for student shot records reveals a surprising story

BY MISTI CRANE AND JENNIFER SMITH RICHARDS — THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

A CENTRAL OHIO mumps outbreak had been building for weeks, sickening dozens and drawing increasing attention to the vaccine-preventable illness. Then several Amish residents from Ohio returned from a missionary trip to the Philippines and began to unknowingly spread measles throughout their community.

Though one outbreak first appeared on a college campus and another in a tightly-knit religious community, the dual crises had something important in common: a vaccine. Mumps and measles can be prevented (measles to a greater extent) by the same shot — one that has been recommended for decades.

But not everyone has had both recommended rounds of the vaccine that protects against measles, mumps and rubella (commonly called MMR). In some cases, that's because they had the diseases as children and are thought to have a natural protection. But a significant and growing number of young people go without some or all vaccines because their parents oppose the shots.

We knew the number of unvaccinated school kids was increasing based on aggregate state data showing how many people have filed for exemptions. Ohio state law says children must be vaccinated unless they have a medical reason (cancer, for instance) to skip shots or their parents have filled out a form saying they have religious or philosophical objections.

But aggregate data wasn't telling us the whole story. We wanted to know: Are there places in Ohio where the rates of unvaccinated children are higher? Are there schools in which a greater number of parents have opted children out of vaccines?

Immunizations for students

Most of the students newly enrolled in Ohio's public schools last school year were up-to-date on their immunizations. But some counties had lower immunization rates for new enrollees than others. Figures include kindergartners and students who were new to their schools in grades 1-12.

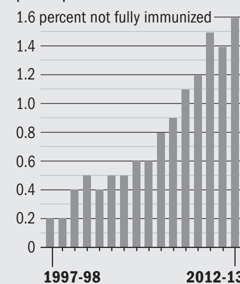
NUMBER, PERCENTAGE IMMUNIZED		
Statewide*	226,312	89.4%
Central Ohio	40,332	91.1%

COUNTY	NEW STUDENTS	PERCENTAGE IMMUNIZED	STUDENTS NOT FULLY IMMUNIZED	NEW STUDENTS EXEMPT FOR RELIGIOUS OR PHILOSOPHICAL REASONS: NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Delaware	3,394	90.3%	330	76	2.2%
Fairfield	3,758	93.2%	256	45	1.2%
Franklin	30,082	90%	2,999	305	1.0%
Licking	3,952	95%	197	47	1.2%
Madison	921	92.7%	67	11	1.2%
Pickaway	1,182	97.9%	25	9	0.8%
Union	961	95.4%	44	21	2.2%

*Raw numbers weren't provided for Hocking County schools. Schools that did not report immunization data to the Ohio Department of Health are not included.

Immunization history

Since the 1997-98 school year, school districts have reported that more incoming kindergarten students haven't been fully immunized because of religious or philosphical reasons.



Sources: Ohio Department of Health, *Dispatch* analysis

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

The Ohio Department of Health publishes the aggregate data. We had to do a little digging to find out what disaggregated data the department kept and how it was maintained.

As in many other states, our state health department regularly collects data from individual counties. This data came directly from the schools. The department gathers school immunization reports each year, from each school in the state, that show basic vaccination data for newly enrolled students. It includes public and private schools. In the past, this data was collected on a paper form. That school survey is now online, though, and contains the same data that was collected on the older paper form — counts of children who are enrolled, the number who have received each vaccine and a breakdown of the number of children who are exempt and why. That breakdown of exemption reasons included those who object to vaccines for religious or philosophical reasons.

We asked the health department to provide the immunization data by county and by school district. Initially, department officials said they'd be able to provide neither. Although the state keeps the vaccination data, which each school submits at the beginning of each year, officials said that data wasn't intended to be used to look at individual schools, districts or counties.

We kept pushing, though, arguing that the manner in which the state uses data has no bearing on whether it should be provided

to us under public records law. The state's position was that the more disaggregated the data was — down to the school level, for example — the less reliable it was from an epidemiological perspective.

Eventually, the state provided county-level data, but nothing for individual districts. When we asked why, they said they had created a special report for us to give us the county breakdown and would not be willing to generate a similar report based on school districts. They also reiterated their objection to providing the numbers saying that they were unreliable because they aren't audited in any way and that they were not intended to be evaluated in that manner.

We filed a formal public records request for the school data and demanded an explanation for why it was being withheld under Ohio law. Weeks passed before the state ultimately agreed to turn over the entire data set so that we could conduct our own analysis. The data came as an Excel file and was relatively clean, though the department provided it without field names. We used the paper forms to correctly identify the field names.

The data didn't include school names, either. Instead, it included each school's IRN, an identifying number that the Ohio Department of Education assigns to each school. That allowed us to pull Education Department data to assign school names and, later, join some education-related data to the immunization set so we could understand more about the schools' demographic makeup. Most states have similar school IDs.

We used Excel to clean the data, but most of the analysis work was done in Access. We looked first at raw numbers: Which schools had the highest number of children who did not have vaccines? Which had the highest number of children whose parents objected to vaccines for religious or philosophical reasons?

Next, we calculated two rates so that we could look beyond the raw numbers, which could be misleading in very small or very large schools. Using Access queries, we calculated the rate of unvaccinated children per new student enrollment. We then calculated the rate of students whose parents object to vaccines per the total number of unvaccinated children. That helped identify what proportion of students weren't fully immunized had avoided vaccines because of parents' objections rather than for medical reasons.

We downloaded basic school demographic data sets from the Ohio Department of Education, which has a robust online data warehouse. We then joined, using the IRN, total school enrollments and poverty data to the immunization data in Access so that we could better understand the nature of the schools. Knowing that Ohio has large pockets of Amish communities, we expected that schools located in heavily Amish counties would have higher rates of vaccine objectors than others.

But what we saw in the data was illuminating. Some of the state's largest and wealthiest districts have some of the highest rates of exemptions, as do some large online-based charter schools. There were also high exemption rates in some of the state's rural areas.

We also took a look at individual schools within and around Franklin County, which is home to Columbus and some of the state's largest school districts. We were interested to find that some of the highest exemption rates were in schools known to have some of the most politically active and well-educated parents.

The public health data that the state was so reluctant to provide allowed The Dispatch to offer unique insight into a timely topic. Amid serious mumps and measles outbreaks, we were able to tell our readers where pockets or clusters of unvaccinated children exist, explain why some areas were more affected than others and point out schools that were most at risk.

Health officials from across the state and country spoke with us to help us best explain the findings to readers. After we received the data, it took us two weeks to publish the story.

When the story was published, we heard from parents who were outraged that so many others in their district or school weren't vaccinating their children. We heard from those who believe that vaccines are harmful.

And we also heard from health commissioners who wanted our data. They wondered why nobody had ever thought to look at school-level vaccine data before.

Misti Crane has covered the medical beat for The Columbus Dispatch since 2000. Prior to that, she covered state and local politics for a number of Ohio newspapers.

Jennifer Smith Richards is the data reporter at The Columbus Dispatch, a recent switch from years of covering schools and education for more than a decade at newspapers in Huntington, W.Va.; Utica, N.Y.; Savannah, Ga.; and Columbus.

Refusing vaccines

According to data reported by schools for the 2013-14 school year, some central Ohio districts have higher numbers of students who aren't fully vaccinated because their parents object to the vaccinations for religious or philosophical reasons. Shown here are the 16 Franklin County districts, plus Delaware, Olentangy and Pickerington.

	KINDERGARTEN NEW STUDENTS			**GRADES 1-12** NEW STUDENTS		
SCHOOL DISTRICTS	TOTAL	NUMBER WHOSE PARENTS OBJECT	PERCENTAGE NOT FULLY IMMUNIZED*	TOTAL	NUMBER WHOSE PARENTS OBJECT	PERCENTAGE NOT FULLY IMMUNIZED*
Grandview Heights	81	6	**7.4%**	47	2	**4.3%**
Delaware	410	25	**6.1%**	388	14	**3.6%**
Bexley	163	6	**3.7%**	101	1	**1.0%**
Pickerington	314	11	**3.5%**	737	14	**1.9%**
Canal Winchester	262	7	**2.7%**	262	4	**1.5%**
Worthington	748	14	**1.9%**	521	14	**2.7%**
Olentangy	857	15	**1.8%**	568	9	**1.6%**
New Albany-Plain	295	5	**1.7%**	286	4	**1.4%**
Whitehall	310	5	**1.6%**	562	1	**0.2%**
Westerville	950	14	**1.5%**	1,015	20	**2.0%**
Gahanna-Jefferson	496	7	**1.4%**	516	6	**1.2%**
South-Western	1,567	19	**1.2%**	2,394	6	**0.3%**
Dublin	853	10	**1.2%**	828	7	**0.8%**
Upper Arlington	396	4	**1.0%**	231	2	**0.9%**
Hilliard	1,070	11	**1.0%**	829	3	**0.4%**
Reynoldsburg	434	4	**0.9%**	746	3	**0.4%**
Columbus	4,702	42	**0.9%**	3,729	31	**0.8%**
Groveport Madison	477	3	**0.6%**	566	2	**0.4%**
Hamilton	218	1	**0.5%**	236	4	**1.7%**
Total	14,603	209	**1.4%**	14,562	147	**1.0%**

*Includes only the students whose parents object to vaccines for philosophical or religious reasons.
Source: *Dispatch* analysis of Ohio Department of Health data

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

IRE RESOURCES

The IRE Resource Center is a major research library containing more than 26,000 investigative stories – both print and broadcast – and more than 4,200 tipsheets available at ire.org/resource-center or by contacting the Resource Center directly, 573-882-3364 or rescntr@ire.org.

TIPSHEETS

No. 4160: "Covering school segregation." ProPublica's Nikole Hannah-Jones provides several tips on how to investigate school segregation. She includes key questions to ask, data to analyze and other resources to use to scrutinize your local schools. (2014)

No. 3914: "School Alarm: Controversial private school reaps public funding." Will Evans of The Center for Investigative Reporting provides an overview of how a private school padded attendance numbers in order to receive public aid. (2013)

No. 3912: "Enterprise on the education beat." Kevin Crowe of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Will Evans of The Center for Investigative Reporting, Tampa Bay Times' Michael LaForgia and Mc Nelly Torres formerly of the Florida Center for Investigative Reporting provide an overview of investigating the possible misdeeds committed by private, public and voucher schools in order to increase funding. (2013)

STORIES

No. 26243: The Dallas Morning News. "Texas Schools/Racial Divisions." This was a six-part series reported and written by students at The University of Texas at Austin and published in The Dallas Morning News (in print and online) and in Reporting Texas (an online news site at The University of Texas at Austin). The series examined the "resegregation" of public schools — and how little had changed in public schools since the Brown v. Board of Education ruling in the 1950s ordering the end of segregated classrooms. The work involved deep dives into data, pressing public officials for accountability and exploring the inequities in the public education system. (2013)

No. 26187: Verdens Gang. "The kindergarten investigation." The Norwegian daily VG used FOI to get access to all kindergarten inspection reports for 2011, 2012 and 2013. They received around 4,500 reports in different formats, a total of 31,000 pages. They found a way to digitize the reports and found that about half were in violation and 55 municipalities had done no inspections. (2013)

No. 25600: El Paso Times. "A Damaged District." For more than a year, Zahira Torres overcame obstacles to document one of the worst school cheating scandals in the nation's history. Where other cheating scandals involved altering accountability tests, the El Paso Independent School District gamed the state and federal accountability systems by targeting Mexican immigrant students. In a number of cases, district officials refused to enroll students or pushed out students already enrolled -— denying countless their constitutional right to an education. In other cases, they arbitrarily reclassified grade levels or altered transcripts, all in an attempt to keep students out of the testing pool. Torres' reporting sparked numerous results. The superintendent who masterminded the scheme went to federal prison. The state education agency removed the school board. And when Torres' reporting documented that the state was aware of details of the cheating in 2010 and cleared the district anyway, the new education commissioner ordered an independent investigation of how the agency missed the cheating. (2012)

IRE JOURNAL

"Doing Great Work Requires Focus." Rose Ciotta details how "Assault on Learning," an investigation into violence in Philadelphia public schools, was produced. (Spring 2012)

"Covert Achievers: Data analysis, public records point to cheating on state tests." Heather Vogell noticed a startling statistic regarding the state test scores of Atherton Elementary, a school located outside Atlanta. There was strong evidence that "adults at Atherton and other Georgia schools most likely cheated on the standardized tests." To report on the issue for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, she used a variety of strategies including data analysis, open records requests and confidential sourcing. (Winter 2010)

EXTRA! EXTRA!

"For special education students, diplomas, jobs increasingly elusive." Mississippi is one of three states where more students with a learning disability graduate with an alternate diploma than a regular one. That poses a serious problem for many students leaving the state's special education programs. According to The Hechinger Report, many colleges and employers don't recognize the alternative diplomas. "As a result, thousands of capable students leave high school with few career and education options in a state with one of the nation's highest unemployment rates." Read the full story bit.ly/LrPk9R. (2014)

IRE RADIO PODCAST

This back-to-school episode is packed with tips and story ideas for reporters covering secondary and higher education. Find it on Soundcloud (bit.ly/1lKxsZN) and iTunes (bit.ly/1o3nldK).

Paula Lavigne and Nicole Noren of ESPN talk about their Title IX investigation, including how they approached sources. ProPublica's Nikole Hannah-Jones also talks about her work covering school segregation.

Breaking the foundations of secrecy

By David Cuillier
University of Arizona School of Journalism

University foundations are some of the richest quasi-government agencies in the nation, yet most of them hide their spending behind nonprofit legal status.

Because these foundations don't fall under most states' public records laws, universities quietly go about their business with their 501(c)(3) foundations holding billions of dollars, spending in ways few see. Harvard's foundation manages more than $30 billion, and even most public universities usually have at least several billion dollars at their disposal.

It is time to break these foundations of secrecy.

Corruption 101

Outrageous stories of corruption and waste are just waiting to be exposed through university foundations. Here are some examples:

- The University of Tennessee's president resigned in 2003 following an investigation by J.J. Stambaugh of the Knoxville News-Sentinel based in part on foundation records that found the president used a university airplane for personal travel, charged personal expenses to university credit cards and awarded no-bid contracts to friends. (bit.ly/1o2A5Bb)
- A recruiting scandal at the University of Colorado in 2005 exposed abuse of foundation funds, including the hiring of strippers and prostitutes for players and recruits. The scandal led to legislation making the foundation subject to the state public records law.
- In 2003, Dan Popkey of The Idaho Statesman revealed that the University of Idaho foundation secretly embarked on a $139 million land grab in distant Boise, resulting in huge debt to taxpayers, resignation of the university president, and the near bankruptcy of the foundation. (bit.ly/1unTn9i)
- In 2010, Sarah Palin was paid $75,000 in secret by a foundation to speak for 30 minutes at California State University. Californians Aware successfully sued for access to the foundation records. The university denied having the records, but two students found portions of the files in a dumpster outside the university administration building.

When organizations with huge amounts of money work in secret, corruption is inevitable. Sunlight is the best disinfectant.

Tide turning toward transparency

More and more states are now requiring their university foundations to be subject to open record laws, thanks in part to journalists exposing wrongdoing.

Alexa Capeloto, an assistant professor of journalism at City University of New York, examined the nation's statutes and case law earlier this year to find that about a dozen states have made foundations open to scrutiny: Alabama, California, Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, Ohio, Pennsylvania and South Carolina.

Attorneys general in Georgia and North Dakota have opined that foundations should be subject to the law. Connecticut, New York and other states are considering avenues for making foundations transparent.

"I think the trend is moving in the right direction," Capeloto told me in an email. "As more stories emerge of potential conflicts of interest or abuse, so do demands for accountability."

It just makes sense. These quasi-government organizations were created as fundraising arms for public agencies, and in many cases they even buy, sell and manage property for universities. Go to any university homepage and click on the "Give" button and you will be directed to a website run by a foundation, but it may look like the university's page. Sometimes funds are co-mingled.

I apply the duck test. If it walks like a duck, quacks like a duck and looks like a duck, it's probably a duck. Many judges agree. They call it the public function test.

Some universities claim that if donor identities were public then they would have a difficult time raising money, but Capeloto said the research indicates otherwise. Eastern Michigan University, for example, actually increased fundraising from $20 million to $25 million after its donor identities became public.

Transparency not only breeds better government, but more money.

Campus crusade

Now is the time for journalists to push for open university foundations in every state. Here is what you can do:

Use it or lose it. If you live in a state where university foundations are subject to public record laws, then take advantage of it. Request the records. Dig. Report. If your state keeps donor identities secret then push for that to be opened.

Change the law. If your state law is fuzzy, then clear it up. Get education writers from news organizations throughout the state to team up, meet with press groups and push for legislation or collaborate on a good lawsuit with solid facts. Exposing corruption at a university or two will help move things along.

Work your investigative magic. If foundations aren't public in your state and you don't want to wait for the law to change, then get busy.

- IRS 990 forms can disclose business ties between foundation executives and the university. These forms are presumptively public and available online.
- Use shoe-leather reporting to get employees to tell you what is happening with the money.
- Request foundation records that are in the possession of the university, which are subject to public record laws. For example, university officials, such as the president, often sit on the foundation board. Request to see those officials' actual compensation, email, and foundation records they might have in their possession. That was key to Californians getting the Palin files.
- Seek out audit reports that many foundations must undergo through a university auditor or state audit.

This is a battle we can win. The public is on our side. Common sense is on our side. It's a duck.

David Cuillier, Ph.D., is director of the University of Arizona School of Journalism in Tucson, Ariz., and Freedom of Information Committee chair of the Society of Professional Journalists. He is co-author, with Charles Davis, of "The Art of Access: Strategies for Acquiring Public Records."

Managing the "go big" investigation

By Ellen Gabler
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

My latest reporting task might have seemed a bit overwhelming or even kind of crazy: request and analyze data from every state in the country and don't take forever to do it.

We were trying to determine if hospitals were botching life-saving tests that screen newborns for serious genetic disorders. For every baby born in the U.S., blood is supposed to be taken at the hospital shortly after birth and quickly sent to state labs for testing — before a baby dies or becomes permanently disabled.

Wisconsin's state lab was refusing to release information that would allow us to see if and where that was a problem in our state. Instead of giving up, we decided to go big and launched a national investigation that has since spurred changes in newborn screening throughout the country.

The experience also changed the way I think about how to "go big" in terms of reporting. It taught me how to keep a project manageable yet ambitious. Some of what I learned might be helpful to a reporter attempting their first statewide story or somebody going after a national analysis.

Stay organized

This project was made possible by spreadsheets. Beyond the data analysis, I used spreadsheets to keep track of pending requests, interactions with state officials and facts about each state's newborn screening program that was used later to create an online interactive.

A spreadsheet also allowed me to efficiently request data from all 50 states, using "mail merge" to populate records requests with information specific to each state. The same tactic could be used to query all counties in a state, for example, or all police departments in your area.

I created a Google spreadsheet listing each state, its public health lab and contact information for the person handling records request. I wrote one records request, adding placeholders for the information unique to each state. For example, "I am requesting information under [state here]'s public records law…" With the press of a button, my request went out to all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

I tracked each state's response and my negotiations with them in a separate spreadsheet. There is no way my brain could keep track of what became hundreds of conversations and email exchanges. I kept notes to remind myself what occurred during every conversation, such as: "Very hostile lab director. Wanted to know why this was any of my business. Hung up. Twice."

I also saved every email I sent and received in a folder. This proved invaluable for remembering what I had to do next and for fact-checking.

Be polite and professional. But mostly, be persistent

If you only remember one thing, remember this: Follow up on records requests. If not for yourself, do it for your fellow journalists. I'm convinced that officials in half the states just figured I'd never follow up so they ignored my request at first.

None of the public records requests were fulfilled immediately or without negotiations. Only one or two were "easy" to get, meaning they didn't take several phone calls and new records requests, dozens of emails or repeated prodding to shake the records loose. Quite often, I thought I'd come to an agreement with an agency on what they'd be sending, but then something different would arrive in my inbox. I went back to them and asked again.

Don't take just one "no" for an answer and don't hesitate to go up the chain of command. Several times I received data after I sent an email to a state's top health official, explaining that their employees had denied my request.

Consider using their own data against them. One state said releasing the name of a hospital and the total number of babies born at that hospital would allow me to identity individuals — a violation of the health privacy act, they said. I went to that health department's site and looked at health statistics the agency regularly publishes. In an email, I politely explained that it seemed strange they would withhold the information I was seeking while they frequently publish the number of individuals within small Indian tribes who are diagnosed with specific sexually transmitted infections. I got the data a few days later.

I ended up with data for nearly 3 million newborn screening tests from 31 states. Having data from more than half the country — including the states in which the most babies are delivered — made the findings from this investigation hard to ignore. That's a big benefit to "going big."

Tell a story, don't write a research paper

Look for characters and a storyline to pull your readers through the topic. Even a story dense with data should be a compelling read. To do this you must exhaustively interview sources. I felt a little crazy at times calling back parents for the third, fourth or even seventh time to ask more questions and verify facts. Don't forget to ask for records and documents, too. It will provide you with details that someone's brain won't recall.

Remember you aren't perfect

Ideally, you'll have great editors who will push you, but even if you don't, challenge yourself to make the story better down to every last word. Ask for advice. Be open to criticism. Realize if someone doesn't understand what you wrote, you probably didn't do a good job explaining it.

Rely on IRE, too. Before I started writing, I reread tipsheets I had saved on "How to write an investigation" and on storytelling for investigations. I was determined to tell a compelling story, and thinking through how others had done it really helped. I also relied on my IRE pals and coworkers to troubleshoot issues with the data and think over my methodology for the analysis.

Have fun!

Ellen Gabler is a reporter and assistant editor on the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel's investigative team. She is also a member of IRE's board of directors, and can be reached at egabler@jrn.com or @eglaber. Read the entire team's newborn screening series at www.jsonline.com/deadlydelays.

Photo courtesy of Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Snapshots from our blogs

Appeals court upholds denial of FOIA request for detainee's photo

BY SHAWN SHINNEMAN

A U.S. Court of Appeals upheld a Freedom of Information Act request denial to grant photos and other materials showing Guantanamo Bay prisoner Mohammed al-Qahtani to the Center for Constitutional Rights. Al-Qahtani is the alleged would-be 20th hijacker on 9/11 and one of the highest profile U.S. detainees at Guantanamo Bay.

The panel ruled that "the federal government sufficiently made its case that the videos and photographs of al-Qahtani should be kept secret under Exemption 1 to FOIA, which provides for the withholding of materials in the interest of 'national defense or foreign policy,'" according to the New York Law Journal. The requested items included FBI video of al-Qahtani in his cell, video showing "forced cell extractions," debriefing video and mugshots, according to the article.

Read the full article here: bit.ly/1rMWsvE

NPR releases militarization data ahead of White House analysis

BY SHAWN SHINNEMAN

NPR has released analyzed data that shows every military item shipped to local, state and federal agencies from 2006 through April 23, 2014, as a part of the 1033 program. The items from the Pentagon's Law Enforcement Support Office include mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicles (MRAPs) and assault rifles, among other things. NPR's analysis also identifies the items by their cost to the Department of Defense.

Since unrest erupted in Ferguson, Missouri, following the killing of teenager Michael Brown, opposition has grown against a trend known as "police militarization," which critics say is fueled by programs that put items formerly used by the U.S. military into the hands of local law enforcement agencies. President Barack Obama in August ordered a review of such programs.

Local and national media have covered police militarization at length since the Ferguson protests began.

Read more: n.pr/1r1RA5x

NICAR Data Library to lower prices, offer free databases

BY LIZ LUCAS

The NICAR Database Library will be implementing some changes in the coming months: The first of these is a reduction in what we charge IRE members for most of our databases. Additionally, a handful of databases will be free to IRE members.

While the amount of work we put into each database remains the same, we also want to embolden the growing spirit of accessibility that exists promisingly in some government agencies, in places like Github where reporters share data and code, and on NICAR-L where all sorts of valuable information is shared on a daily basis. Our ultimate goal is getting good data in the hands of reporters who do strong investigative work, so we are taking steps to make our data more accessible.

If you've purchased data from us in the past, you'll notice that we've also removed the tiered payment system. We realize that the size of a newsroom does not necessarily correlate with that newsroom's dedication to important data-driven, investigative work. We want to be sure that freelancers, journalism educators and lone reporters in large newsrooms can afford our data even if they don't have the financial backing of their organizations. We will also begin selling the majority of our data to people who are not IRE members, at a higher price point.

Finally, of the 40+ databases that NICAR has maintained over the years, we are evaluating to which datasets we can still add significant value. While the archive data will always be available, some of our long-standing databases (such as Hazardous Materials Incidents) are now easily accessible from the agency. In those cases we will send you directly to the source while still providing documentation that will help you get what you want from the data.

The NICAR Database Library is committed to being a resource to investigative journalists undertaking data-driven projects, a commitment that has driven our small outfit for 25 years. If you have suggestions for other ways that we can help, please let us know.

The NICAR Database Library
datalib@ire.org
(573) 884-7711

High-stakes testing in Norwegian schools subject to corruption

BY SHAZIA SARWAR

A series of investigative reports by Verdens Gang (VG) in 2013 exposed that principals at all primary and secondary schools in Oslo, Norway's capital, were given personal incentives and salary benefits in secret working contracts and on the basis of student results on national tests.

The investigation found a significant correlation between the number of students exempt from tests and the average scores. An associate professor at the University of Oslo reviewed the data and found that the more students exempt, the better a school's score. Minority students and children with other special needs are eligible to be exempt after an individual evaluation.

For several years there has been a fierce national debate over the use of the results generated from national tests mandatory for primary and secondary schools in Norway. The results have been used to rank good and bad schools, especially in the multiethnic capital of Norway. There has been a significant amount of pressure on principals and teachers to produce good results. There have been a number of articles in

Norway on the possibility of teachers and principals tampering with exemption rules in order to influence scores. Prior to the VG investigation, no one had been able to show a correlation and a clear motive to tamper with scores.

The investigation started with an observation — two similar schools, both with about 95 percent minority students, had different percentages of exempt students and different average scores. The school with 22 percent of its students exempt from the test had a significantly better average than the school that only excluded seven percent of its students.

A correlation analysis was conducted between "rate of exemption" and "average score." It showed a significant connection. The more students exempt, the better the average score. This information led to our first articles. In this initial series we also introduced a secret report sent to the education department. The document included worries about exemption practices on national tests and mentioned the possibility of cheating and manipulation. Several sources came forward and talked about how much time and effort was spent seeking loopholes to meet the score demands from the Oslo education department. The first articles lead to a national debate in several newspapers and on TV.

In the wake of the exposé a question arose: Why would teachers and principals possibly cheat? Is there a personal gain?

Another lengthy investigation disclosed that Oslo principals have secret employment contracts with previously unknown evaluation criteria. In Norway, all executives in the public sector are normally required to disclose their employment contracts. The pay and benefits for every CEO in Norway is public information.

Norway has liberal transparency rules, but during our investigation the Oslo council was not willing to disclose the contracts. They wouldn't even release a blank form. Then several national politicians demanded to see the contracts. After a six-month-long tug of war, county commissioners ruled in favor of VG. The newspaper got contracts for all 105 Oslo principals (censored for name and information of personal nature).

Several analyses were done. Among the findings: Each principal's contract was reviewed each year and leaders got marks (86 in all) mostly on how well his or her students performed on tests. The Oslo education minister confirmed that results depicted through the 86 parameters had a direct impact on yearly salary and benefits negotiations.

A number of calculations and a new correlation analysis, done on the many parameters disclosed, showed that the main score of each principal was the same as the average score on student test results. Bad student scores resulted in a bad score for the principal. A bad or good score had a direct effect on the principal's position when going into yearly salary negotiations.

Shazia Sarwar is a reporter and commentator at the news section in Verdens Gang (VG) in Oslo, Norway. She has done investigative reporting in education, child abuse, assault rapes and violence against women. Sarwar specializes in data-driven journalism, business-journalism, cancer and minority communities.

INVESTIGATIVE REPORTERS & EDITORS, INC. is a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the quality of investigative reporting within the field of journalism. IRE was formed in 1975 with the intent of creating a networking tool and a forum in which journalists from across the country could raise questions and exchange ideas. IRE provides educational services to reporters, editors and others interested in investigative reporting and works to maintain high professional standards.

PROGRAMS AND SERVICES:

IRE RESOURCE CENTER – A rich reserve of print and broadcast stories, tipsheets and guides to help you start and complete the best work of your career. This unique library is the starting point of any piece you're working on. You can search through abstracts of more than 25,500 investigative-reporting stories through our website.

Contact: Lauren Grandestaff, lauren@ire.org, 573-882-3364

IRE AND NICAR DATABASE LIBRARY – Administered by IRE and the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting. The library has copies of many government databases, and makes them available to news organizations at or below actual cost. Analysis services are available on these databases, as is help in deciphering records you obtain yourself.

Contact: Elizabeth Lucas, liz@ire.org. To order data, call 573-884-7711.

ON-THE-ROAD TRAINING – As a top promoter of journalism education, IRE offers loads of training opportunities throughout the year. Possibilities range from national conference and regional workshops to weeklong boot camps and on-site newsroom training. Costs are on a sliding scale and fellowships are available to many of the events.

Contact: Jaimi Dowdell, jaimi@ire.org, 314-402-3281 or Megan Luther, megan@ire.org, 605-996-3967

PUBLICATIONS:

THE IRE JOURNAL – Published four times a year. Contains journalist profiles, how-to stories, reviews, investigative ideas and backgrounding tips. The Journal also provides members with the latest news on upcoming events and training opportunities from IRE and NICAR.

Contact: Megan Luther, megan@ire.org, 605-996-3967

UPLINK – An online publication by IRE and NICAR on computer-assisted reporting. Uplink stories are written after reporters have had particular success using data to investigate stories. The columns include valuable information on advanced database techniques as well as success stories written by newly trained CAR reporters.

Contact: David Herzog, dherzog@ire.org, 573-882-2127

FOR INFORMATION ON:

ADVERTISING – Stephanie Sinn, stephanie@ire.org, 901-286-7549

CONFERENCES – Stephanie Sinn, stephanie@ire.org, 901-286-7549

DONATIONS – Mark Horvit, mark@ire.org, 573-882-1984

LISTSERVS, BOOT CAMPS AND EVENT REGISTRATIONS – Amy Johnston, amy@ire.org, 573-884-1444

MEMBERSHIP AND SUBSCRIPTIONS – John Green, jgreen@ire.org, 573-882-2772

MAILING ADDRESS:

IRE, 141 Neff Annex , Missouri School of Journalism, Columbia, MO 65211

IRE

Investigative Reporters & Editors, Inc.
Missouri School of Journalism
141 Neff Annex
Columbia, MO 65211
www.ire.org

Philip Meyer Award

Recognizing the best journalism done using social science research methods

Application deadline: Nov. 21

Enter online now: ire.org/awards/philip-meyer-awards