Key Findings

- The most prevalent news cycles focused on the “Achievement Gap.”
- There are few words that are universally used across digital media stories about the achievement gap, school climate, or Head Start. This suggests the topics do not share a common narrative in the media discourse.
- Publications can greatly influence not only the reader’s understanding of an issue, but can also create a narrative adopted by other publications. This is why it’s so important to identify potentially problematic, coupled narratives like “immigration” and “head-start,” and work to prevent their propagation.
For as long as there has been public education, there have been disparities in the availability and quality of education for our nation's children. And while there have been numerous efforts to level the playing field, we still see significant disparities across school systems and student performance.

In recent years, there has been an increasing emphasis in the media and among policymakers about the existence of these disparities, and what should be done about them. In fact, despite all the discussion about the concern of “over testing” during the debates surrounding the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act, one of the items that did not generate serious debate was the need to break down test scores by demographic group so that educators could identify where achievement gaps exist. There has also been an increase in awareness of how school climate can affect achievement, as well as the importance of providing high quality learning opportunities well before a child reaches kindergarten as a tool to address the achievement gap.

While there is considerable agreement about the need to align around a common goal -- education equity -- the messaging to achieve this goal varies. Additionally, opinions about how reforms or initiatives are understood, impact society, and address the core problems is inconsistent across political lines. Contributing to this challenge is the fact that -- intentionally or unintentionally -- people frequently seek information from media outlets that reinforce their existing opinions and beliefs, particularly when issues may take on a partisan spin.

The degree to which the media contributes to shaping personal beliefs may be up for debate, but there can be no doubt that it plays some role. As a result, advocates have an opportunity to help shape public opinion if they are able to help drive their preferred narrative about an issue in the media. The question is, “How can this be done effectively and efficiently?” news media is about more than disseminating information; it is a business and a money-making enterprise.

Enter Media Cloud. Media Cloud is a web-based, open-source tool that tracks media conversations across the globe. It is hosted by MIT’s Center for Civic Media and Harvard’s Berkman Klein Center, and analyzes and aggregates news content from 50,000 digital media sources. Media Cloud’s analytical tools help users better understand the opportunities and obstacles for reframing prevailing media narratives around the issues of the day, and the subtext driving them. The tool’s analytics evaluate the media stories, including the narrative framework and the specific word choices, that may influence how people think and that shape their intellectual and emotional response to news stories.

The Media Cloud team has prepared this report to analyze the opportunities and obstacles for success in reframing the public debate as it relates to health and education. Support for this report was provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the
Foundation. This report examines how the media has described issues related to the achievement gap, school climate, and Head Start in its reporting. The report should give the reader a better understanding of the digital media landscape surrounding each topic, and the way that related information is communicated. Media Cloud’s analysis produced interesting findings in terms of frequency, prevalence, and context, which Media Cloud’s tools depict visually in multiple ways.

Pulse
The Media Cloud tool, Pulse, produces a basic line graph (see Figure 1) that plots the number of sentences that refer to the topics listed above that were published in news articles between September 2015 - September 2016.

**Figure 1**

As you can see in the above graph, over the course of this time period, there were a few discernible peaks where coverage of the phrases related to achievement gap and school climate increase. Here are some possible reasons for this spike in coverage:

- **October 2015**
  - Achievement Gap: Obama’s administration calls for a limit and decrease in testing, among schools throughout the country, specifically stating that “no child would spend more than 2 percent of classroom instruction time taking tests.”
  - School Climate: There are two key topics that gained attention during this time period: alternatives to suspension (specifically schools offering counseling instead of suspending students) and a focus on increasing graduation rates in high schools.

- **December 2015**
  - Achievement Gap & School Climate: Full release of the U.S. Department of Education’s data on high school graduation rates, finding a record high in the 2013-14 year – 82%. The data also showed a decrease in the graduation rate gap between African-American and white students.

- **February 2016**
  - Achievement Gap: Increased focus on district-level graduation rates compared to average graduation rates.

As you can also see, the topic of Head Start generated relatively little news coverage. While Figure 1 measures the extent of coverage about a general topic, there is little that links these spikes together with the possible exception of a graduation rate...
A report from the U.S. Department of Education that relates to topics under each of these queries.

Knowing about these spikes in media coverage could inform messaging for a given campaign. For example, if the White House was monitoring these terms through Media Cloud in 2015-16, they could have made a stronger case detailing the relationship between a positive school climate and closing the achievement gap. They could also have made a more concerted push to tie another priority - Head Start - to closing the achievement gap.

Similarly, actors within the movement could have more strategically aligned their messaging. While two of the issues had a dominant news-cycle in December 2015, for example, they each also had long periods of little coverage. Had advocates been monitoring the extent of the coverage of these issues, there could have been more proactive efforts to push media coverage during other strategic points of the year - e.g., during graduation season. This analysis also provides an opportunity to foster consensus building and to generate a common narrative over time.

**Frequency and Language Use Results**

Language is not neutral; words are filled with imagery and emotion and word choice affects the way a message is received and understood by an audience. Much of today’s mainstream media does more than report facts; it attempts to persuade people and influence their beliefs and behaviors through specific messaging. To more fully understand media coverage about each of these topics and how they relate to each other, we need to be able to contextualize these articles by looking at a richer, more complex, and more complete data source; one capable of shedding light on the differing word choices media sources use and how that influences the broader narrative. The graphs in Figure 2 below show the words most commonly used in the stories that discuss the achievement gap, school climate, or Head Start.
Unsurprisingly, there are some common words across each subtopic, such as students and education; however, beyond that, there are few words that link the narratives of each. On the other hand, there are very few specific words or phrases that shed light on the narrative of each topic.

**Achievement Gap**

This word map suggests that the conversation centered around disparities in achievement disproportionately affecting particular groups, which often include issues of race. Furthermore, we can see that most of the reporting focused on immediate education-related issues pertaining to achievement gaps, rather than the longitudinal implications of educational achievement on health and lifetime well-being.
School Climate
Most of the words here focus on educational attainment, dropout rates and state-level analyses of graduation rates. Additionally, it has a heavy focus on the shift from disciplinary practices to a more holistic approach to address the root issues, as has been done in Oregon. This is not necessarily surprising, as there was an ongoing conversation about how race plays into the school to prison pipeline, a topic that was often discussed by the Obama Administration throughout 2016.

Head Start
We can deduce from our graph that the coverage around Head Start focused more on the political, rather than the social or longitudinal impacts for individuals and communities. It was also the only topic among the three discussed here that included health-related items (e.g., hunger, nutrition, vegetables). It illustrates that if the goal of an advocate is to get people to understand that there is a relationship between education and health issues, there is much more work to be done in getting the media to see these issues as related.

Source Networks
Graphics such as those shown above put into perspective how stories are shaped by publishers and the specific language they use. Media Cloud’s suite of tools also allows the user to learn more about how these issues are being talked about in the larger media landscape or the framework for their coverage. One of Media Cloud’s more informative and innovative tools allows users to identify a network of influential sources. This tool can be found in the Topic Mapper section of Media Cloud’s website.

Media Cloud uses a source networking tool to identify and depict media ecosystems for a keyword based on two criteria: 1) influence and 2) language use. Influence is determined by factors including how many articles in the database link to the story and how frequently it is shared through social media (such as through Facebook), and tracked through other various digital analytics and social networking tools. Users can use the Media Cloud website to depict this information in chart form (see figure 3). Because of the complexity of this search tool, it might take a day or two to receive results. Below is an example from the query “Head Start.” It shows that the United States Department of Agriculture website and The Washington Post, were among the most influential sources related to Head Start coverage based on the number of other publications that linked to these sources.

Key Finding
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If you are interested in some of Media Cloud’s more advanced aspects, users can also collaborate with Media Cloud to produce certain types of information in a more complicated graphical form. For example, Figure 4 below depicts the news sources that are the most influential sources in the network based on the number of inlinks found by Media Cloud as it relates to coverage of the achievement gap. This type of map allows one to deduce a media source’s reach across organizations (depicted in orange), national media outlets (blue), and journals or blogs (gray).
By looking at figure 4, you can quickly identify that The Washington Post and Ed.gov are the sources most relied on by other news outlets. While countless outlets reported on the achievement gap, that reporting may have served a different purpose. Where outlets like The Washington Post, NPR, and EdWeek are more likely to report on the issue to a broad audience with high-level reporting, other outlets may be using the topic to serve a constituency or advocate for a particular side. Figure 4 shows that these media outlets are less likely to be linked to, presumably because the more mainstream news outlets and outlets advocating a different point of view are less likely to rely on them for information. (e.g., Breitbart, on the lower-right hand side of the graph).

Advocates can use graphs like these to maximize opportunities to influence the narrative by identifying the media sources that are most commonly linked by other sources and therefore central to the development of a particular narrative. These maps are most helpful for following stories that are unfolding online where information is shared by linking to other, key stories.

**Conclusion**

This brief summary of Media Cloud’s education-related analysis only scratches the surface of what is possible, and the tool is being updated frequently. For the latest information, please visit Media Cloud’s website, explore the Media Cloud blog where analysts share findings, get on Media Cloud’s mailing list, review the user guide, or simply contact Natalie Gyenes at support@mediacloud.org.