

Eduspeak

The world of public education has a language all its own — which may be unintelligible to many reporters and their readers. But as education comes increasingly to the forefront as a policy issue, that language needs to be translated.

By Sigrid Bathen

The Education Writers Association recently issued a “glossary of education terms” for its members, and anybody else who wants to visit their website (www.ewa.org). It starts with terms such as “alternative assessment” (“any form of measuring what students know and are able to do than traditional standardized tests”) and “basal readers” (“elementary school books that incorporate simple stories”) and moves on to “outcomes-based education” (“focuses more on goals, or outcomes, than on ‘inputs’”) and “performance-based assessment” (“also known as authentic assessment”).

And those are only the simpler terms. It can get much worse, as any education writer called upon to explain the terminology for a general-circulation reading audience — or hapless parent attending a school board meeting for the first time — can attest.

Rarely has public education in California — or, for that matter, in the rest of the country — held the interest of politicians so intensely, or for so long. But, like most political fads, education reform often suffers from a failure to define the terms. After all, the system had crashed and nearly burned as a result of political disinterest, plummeting schools of the wealthiest state in the nation to the bottom of the heap in performance and funding; suddenly, it was a “front-burner” issue.

As a result, news organizations that traditionally gave education short shrift started devoting heavy, though often simplistic or sensationalist, coverage to the subject. Political reporters, knowing a trend issue when they saw one, showed up regularly at the increasing numbers of news events, staged and otherwise, created by politicians to showcase their newfound interest in the education crisis. Reporters perplexed by the dizzying depths of education jargon zoned out during interminable meetings of the state Board of Education, which sets policy for the state’s schools and until recently was far down on the priority coverage list of most news organizations. TV crews struggled to get something, anything, suitable for a short shot, often of other reporters taking notes, with a reasonably intelligible sound bite for the evening news.

As education increasingly has risen to center stage in

recent years, several statewide education groups, notably the California School Boards Association and the teachers’ unions — realizing the education industry’s need for some serious, understandable public relations — have held cordial, well-attended “news briefings,” sometimes over lunch, for reporters largely unschooled in “eduspeak.” The educators trot out reams of charts and financial analyses, reporters ask a few questions, eat their lunches, and leave with fat packets of information many would never use or understand. It was like walking into a meeting of some secret society with its own language.

One of the key words in the language of Eduspeak these days is “accountability.” Basically, this means the folks actually running the schools — mainly teachers and principals — will somehow be held “accountable” for student performance. “Either they will get better — or they will be encouraged to find another line of work” as Governor Gray Davis, uncharacteristically pugnacious, said in his inaugural address this past January.

Accountability is a political and legal quagmire of major proportions, as North Carolina state education officials enforcing a controversial new accountability law are quickly learning. They were recently sued by two teachers dismissed by state evaluators under the law, then promptly rehired by the local school board. It is a case being watched throughout the country, and illustrative of the complex dimensions of education law and policy.

Educational accountability as buzzword and media cliché took on new meaning — if no clear definition — at the outset of the fledgling Davis administration. Three weeks after Davis’ 20-point victory over Republican Dan Lungren, nary a press conference had been held, not a cabinet appointment made. Although many press releases had spewed from the transition office of the then-governor-elect — and one hastily scheduled telephone conference call had been held to announce initial transition plans — the ordinarily voluble and accommodating Davis had not met face-to-face with reporters since that heady election night November 3.

Then, just before Thanksgiving and the first, five-hour meeting of his much-heralded, blue-ribbon education task

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force, Davis' press handlers made a last-minute announcement that the boss would meet with reporters via telephone conference call after the closed-door meeting in Los Angeles.

At the appointed hour, news media representatives from throughout the state — most of them political reporters, with a smattering of education writers from the major papers — waited silently for the governor-elect, or rather his voice, to show up. It was oddly quiet, though you could hear papers shuffling, an occasional cough or the muffled strains of a radio or TV program. If you arrived on time, or a few minutes after the scheduled time, you might not have known you were even in the right place; there was no conference gatekeeper save the AT&T teleconferencing system with its computerized voiceover.

Finally, the governor-elect got on the line, sounding affable, tired, and extremely cautious about discussing specifics of the closed-door meeting. He called it "an extraordinarily good meeting" in which "not one person pushed their own agenda." He said he "reiterated [his] priorities to lift student performance across the board." He gave the date of the next meeting.

After pressing Davis for more specifics — indeed, any specifics — on his education plan (this was, after all, a task

force to recommend legislative and policy proposals for Davis' education agenda), the reporters mostly gave up. A few ventured into the shadowy world of eduspeak after Davis raised, but did not elaborate on, his plans for holding school officials "accountable" for student performance, or lack it. No one, least of all Davis, sought actually to define the word in real terms for real California classrooms.

Reporters sorting through the education miasma will confront not only a huge glut of existing regulations and laws, but a predictable deluge of bills by image-conscious legislators, many with little knowledge of the field. Some experts question whether new legislation is the answer. Scott Plotkin, chief consultant to the Senate Education Committee, says most education reform can be accomplished administratively and via new policy directions, "though we will have to come up with something on accountability." An accountability measure was vetoed by Governor Pete Wilson last session, and the new administration is faced with no fewer, or less vexing, barriers to consensus on a fair and legally binding measure in a field fraught with land mines both political and legal.

Until recently, with some notable exceptions, education coverage historically has been regarded by some editors as "soft" news, often assigned, like elementary school teaching, to women. At most papers (broadcast coverage was rare), it involved covering local school board meetings and, in the state Capitol, legislative issues and, occasionally, the state board and superintendent. Depending on the news medium's commitment to the subject, it can mean an extremely heavy workload, especially if the reporter ever wants to have time to get to the real stories of education, those beyond the boardroom and actually inside the classroom. Perhaps because education has not been a heavily covered subject in most media until recent years, the business of education has been conducted largely out of public view, with the players in the business of education talking mostly to each other, the wheel being endlessly reinvented as they speak, the jargon becoming increasingly dense and difficult to decipher.

And then there's the matter of what reporters and their bosses choose to cover — and how they cover it. A recent study commissioned by the Education Writers Association concluded that readers and viewers often aren't getting the education news they want and need from the media. Readers want "more substance and less conflict," according to the study, and were more interested in reading about the schools than about crime. TV news directors take note: "There is something about agitating people constantly and then walking away," said Steve Farkas of the Public Agenda Foundation, a non-profit, nonpartisan group which conducted the study. "You have to give them solutions." 🏠

Senior Editor Sigrid Bathen, a former Sacramento Bee education writer who also served as press secretary to then-Superintendent of Public Instruction Wilson Riles, covers education for the California Journal. She can be reached at sigridb@statenet.com.