

PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN CRISIS: A CONTENT ANALYSIS
OF NEWS FRAMING SINCE NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

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ABSTRACT

Public confidence in the U.S. education system has steadily eroded as a prevailing narrative has formed in the news media claiming that public schools are failing and in crisis. Yet, student academic performance has increased in the past decades despite schools facing the challenges of more economic and cultural diversity and increased accountability. In response, this study seeks to examine how the news media frame public education, particularly since the adoption of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Does the news coverage of public education characterize schools as in crisis? Do articles about No Child Left Behind perpetuate the failing schools narrative in the news coverage of public education? A quantitative content analysis of 332 newspaper articles from *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* between January 1, 2001 and December 31, 2012 coded the types of frames used, words used to illustrate a failing public schools theme, sources referenced, attribution of blame to specific individuals or groups, and overall tone or impression given of public schools. The results provided evidence that articles about No Child Left Behind perpetuate a failing schools narrative. Specifically, the study showed that the same types of frames identified in research on other topics are also used in the news coverage of public education; public education is framed more episodically than thematically; a failing public schools theme was identified; and the news coverage, while mostly balanced, had a higher frequency of negative articles than positive.