

August 2013

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Recommended Citation

Day, Richard E., "Outsized profit expectations harm education news" (2013). *Curriculum and Instruction Faculty and Staff Scholarship*. Paper 49.

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Outsized profit expectations harm education news

By Richard E. Day in the *Herald-Leader*: Monday, August 12, 2013, p. A11

It appears that former *Herald-Leader* and *Los Angeles Times* editor John Carroll was on to something when he predicted, in 2006, that outsized profit expectations in the newspaper industry would have a destructive effect on journalism. Seven years and several rounds of newsroom layoffs later — all in the service of maximized profits — its effects can be seen in education reporting on these pages.

When Rosalind Hurley-Richards received the \$25,000 Milken Educator Award in 1996 it was news and the *Herald-Leader* ran a story about Commissioner Wilmer Cody's visit to Squires Elementary School for the award presentation. When she was named Kentucky Teacher of the Year in 1997 for her "real world" approach to teaching, it was news again, and the *Herald-Leader* followed her progress as a national finalist. In 1997, the paper reported that Hurley-Richards was directing her own program at the Preparatory Academy at Lexington and that she was speaking at a conference for black career women in 1998.

Even before his arrival as superintendent of Fayette County Public Schools, the *Herald-Leader* reported on Stu Silberman's success in Daviess County and his interest in the state education commissioner's post. Beginning in 1999 there were hundreds of stories about his work in the local schools.



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But for some reason, it was not news — or at least, the *Herald-Leader* did not cover it — when in 2009 Silberman suspended and dismissed Hurley-Richards for "conduct unbecoming a teacher" after she disciplined an unruly child in the hallway at Cardinal Valley Elementary School. What circumstances could have led to such a shocking event? *Herald-Leader* readers might never know.

By the time the Kentucky Supreme Court vindicated Hurley-Richards in April (no story) — in what Fayette County Education Association officials were calling a landmark case — she had been through an administrative hearing (no story), Fayette Circuit Court (no story) and the Kentucky Court of Appeals (no story).

Was the lack of coverage an editorial decision or simply a lack of newsroom resources?

When a teacher's aide crashed her car, with two children as passengers, and snapped a utility pole on Georgetown Street and was charged with a DUI recently, the *Herald-Leader* ran the story and printed her name. But when Fayette County schools director of human resources Melodee Parker

wrecked her car downtown in 2011 and was cited for driving under the influence, there was no story.

On *Kentucky School News and Commentary* (Theprincipal.blogspot.com), an education blog I moderate, these and other unreported stories have caused some parents to entertain wild speculations about the quality of *Herald-Leader* reporters, and motives for reporting, or not reporting, certain stories. Some question whether the paper is protecting the school district by passing on certain embarrassing stories. Others have suggested the school district pays off reporters. Readers are confused, and these speculations are very unfortunate.

I suspect the real answer lies elsewhere.

Even before the great recession damaged economic conditions globally, journalism professionals were recoiling from historically high profit expectations by their parent corporations. As Carroll warned, continued expectations of 20 percent profit margins in the newspaper industry would damage the quality of journalism. "At a 20 percent margin, I feel strongly that we are cashing in the paper's future in favor of current earnings," Carroll told *NewsHour*. In the battle between those who see themselves as serving shareholders and those who see themselves serving readers, the shareholders are winning.

I am very concerned about what news corporations have done to newsrooms and I believe there are qualitative deficiencies in today's coverage that are leaving the community in the dark on too many important topics. One is left with the impression that the few remaining reporters are too often unaware of what's going on or ill-equipped to do anything about it. But McClatchy is still insisting that the *Herald-Leader* produce a return between 15 percent and 20 percent. Apparently shareholders care less about high quality coverage than lining their own pockets, and the net effect is harmful to democracy.

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