



September 2026

Unfair & Imbalanced? Phoenix-area Media Coverage of K-12 Education, 2016-2026

Arizona's major news outlets skew negative on ESAs, Charters

Matthew Nielsen

Abstract

This paper presents the results of coding three story-level corpora of Phoenix-market local news, 2016–2026: an ESA corpus ($n = 180$), coverage of traditional school districts ($n = 168$), and coverage of charter schools ($n = 97$). Among the 97 charter stories, more than half assign the cause of a harm to the charter operator (54 percent). When the story is about a district problem, the board that acted is the assigned cause in only 38 percent; the two largest non-board causes, state budget (28 percent) and demographics (24 percent), together account for another 52 percent. Concerns related to Empowerment Scholarship Accounts, are most commonly blamed on parents (37 percent) and politics or procedures (31 percent). Interestingly, ESAs are named in only 23 of the 265 district and charter school stories, but among those 23, valence is 14 anti, 8 mixed, 1 none, and 0 pro. In the ESA corpus, where ESAs are the primary subject, the modal frame is waste, fraud, or abuse (26 percent) and favorable frames account for roughly one story in nine, so the scarcity of favorable choice framing holds whether the object is 23 incidental mentions or 180 policy stories. This paper focuses on story choice and attribution, not on a uniform anti-choice frame. Intercoder agreement is $\kappa = 0.77$ for harm attribution and $\kappa = 0.79$ for ESA valence ($n = 17$ reachable bodies each).

1. Introduction

The question this study attempts to answer is not whether coverage is “pro” or “anti” school choice in the aggregate. The question is who a news story assigns responsibility to when a harm is identified, which stories the news desk chooses to run, and how the desk frames choice policy when the choice program itself is the subject. Over the last fifteen years, Arizonans created (and formula-funded) the country’s largest universal ESA while Phoenix local news was covering two other beats at volume: district school closures and charter-operator investigations. Those news beats are not the same story with the names swapped. This paper asks whether the outlets treat the two sectors as interchangeable “education” copy or as different objects with different blamed parties, and, in a third corpus built around the ESA program itself, how the news desks frame ESA policy when the program is the subject rather than a passing mention.

Two claims are easy to over-read from the same dataset. One is that local news primarily “blames school choice” for district decline. The other is that local news “never covers choice favorably.” Neither is what this study shows. However, while Hess, Bell, and Martin found roughly even distribution of positive and negative published news pieces in their 2018 “Is media coverage of school choice biased¹,” this study finds there are some reliable claims we can derive from Phoenix’s outlets that are less than balanced.

When the stated harm relates to a charter, the blamed party more than half of the time is the charter school operator. When the harm relates to a school district, the blamed party is the school board less than half of the time. When ESAs are the subject, irresponsible parents and flawed policy are blamed.

It should be noted, that Carr’s² findings on media coverage relative to charter schools in North Carolina run counter to this paper’s, but could easily be explained by the immense differences in size and maturity of the charter school sectors examined. While Arizona currently has over 500 charter schools educating in excess of 20% of school-aged children in Arizona, in 2014 there were 148 charter schools in North Carolina educating about 5% of the state’s K-12 students. This alone could account for a significant difference in valence.

¹ Hess, F. M., Bell, B., & Martin, R. J. (2018). “Is media coverage of school choice biased?” Education Next / AEI.

² Carr, N. K. (2015). Investigating the North Carolina charter school movement. EdD Dissertation. UNC Greensboro.

2. Background

2.1 Arizona's choice architecture

Charter schools are public schools authorized under 1994 statute (A.R.S. § 15-181 ff.). They receive state per-pupil aid, may not charge tuition, and are exempt from several district statutes (i.e. procurement requirements, governing board composition, teacher certification) unless the charter agreement states otherwise. For instance, charter school founders may write procurement exceptions into the charter, but in practice most schools operate outside ordinary competitive-bidding rules. Related-party contracts, including leases, management fees, and services sold to the school by founders or relatives, must be disclosed in audits but are not prohibited. Today, there are over 500 charter schools in Arizona serving about 2 in 10 school-aged children.

The Arizona legislature created the ESA program in 2011 for students with disabilities and later added foster, Native American reservation, military, and failing-school categories. A 2017 attempt at universal eligibility was referred to the 2018 ballot and failed. But in July 2022, Governor Ducey signed³ HB 2853, which opened ESA accounts to every K-12 student. Families who leave (or never enter) a district or charter school receive an average of around \$7,500 per pupil (the state's "base support level") for private tuition, therapies, homeschool materials, and other related costs. Empowerment Scholarship Accounts are not "vouchers," since they can be used for costs other than tuition at a school. By 2026 the program exceeded 102,000 accounts and \$1 billion in annual cost (total K-12 spending in Arizona exceeds \$8 billion annually). Advocates call the accounts parent tools that are a boon to students who are not well-served in district or charter schools. Opponents call them vouchers and frame them as a drain on district budgets. Over 100,000 students are currently enrolled in the state's ESA program, or about 1 in 10 school-aged children.

Homeschooled students account for about 40,000 students statewide, some of whom participate in the ESA program. About 7 in 10 school-aged children attend a district school in Arizona.

3. Data

The policy corpus (n = 180) is specifically ESA policy coverage: legislation, ballot fights, audits, enrollment tallies, parent handbooks and vendors, and named ESA or 'voucher' stories treated as policy. The district corpus (n = 168) is traditional district-institution stories. The charter corpus (n = 97) is charter-institution

³Source: <https://www.azleg.gov/press/house/55LEG/2R/220707TOMAHB2853.pdf>

stories. All three run 2016–2026 across the same five Phoenix-market local-news outlets: ABC15, FOX10, CBS 5, 12News, and AZ Central, and the coding unit is the individual news item, aired segment, or station article. The distribution of the number of stories per outlet for each corpus is illustrated in Table 1:

	District	Charter	ESA	TOTALS
ABC15	39	25	56	120
FOX10	27	8	28	63
CBS5	22	10	32	64
NBC12	30	18	49	97
AZC	50	36	15	101
	168	97	180	

Table 1. Corpus distribution by subject; quantities

The three corpora are parallel objects, not a stack. A story can enter the policy corpus because it names ESA policy and also enter the district or charter corpus because its subject is a specific district or charter; those overlaps are flagged and are never counted twice inside a single table. Tables 2–4 use the district and charter corpora only, because the harm-attribution and ESA-valence fields were built and reliability-tested on the institution corpora. The policy corpus was coded earlier and on a different scheme — primary topic and primary frame (ten frame categories; see §5.4) — and its frame tallies are reported on their own terms in §5.4 rather than pooled into the attribution tables.

AZ Central rows are included in the analysis counts on all three corpora but were not dual-coded on valence and attribution fields. 12News blocked some automated fetches; those URLs remain in the file but sit outside the headline reliability n.

4. Methods

The three Phoenix-market local news corpora were coded at the story level: the policy corpus ($n = 180$), the district corpus ($n = 168$), and the charter corpus ($n = 97$), across the years and outlets described in §3.

A story enters the policy corpus when it is about ESA or ‘voucher’ legislation, a school-choice ballot measure, an ESA audit or cost tally, an ESA parent handbook or vendor, or the Empowerment Scholarship Account treated as policy. It does not enter merely because a charter school or a district closure leads the

story. The policy corpus carries two fields — primary topic and primary frame — and does not carry the harm-attribution or ESA-valence fields, which were built later for the institution corpora.

The district and charter corpora carry the three story-level fields used in Tables 2–4.

ESA valence. Each story was coded for how it treats Empowerment Scholarship Accounts specifically — anti, pro, mixed, or none. Generic “school choice” language with no reference to ESAs, vouchers, or Empowerment is coded ‘none,’ and private schooling on its own does not qualify. A story is mixed only when it carries a genuinely favorable element; an official quoted saying schools should “adapt and compete” is not one.

Harm attribution. Where a story describes a harm, we coded the party the story holds responsible for it, not the story’s overall valence, and not whether ESAs are mentioned. The categories are charter operator, school board, state budget, demographics/enrollment shift, ESA program, parent, local voters, mixed, and none. Two boundary rules govern the field. When a school board has voted to close a school — or the story is the aftermath of that vote — responsibility is assigned to the board; boards merely considering closure, and votes on staff cuts rather than closures, do not trigger the rule, and the underlying driver of any enrollment loss is recorded separately. The ESA program is coded as a cause of harm only when the story attributes a realized harm to it; a story that notes ESAs exist, or that they can cover tuition, does not qualify.

Charter as parent option (exploratory). A story was coded here only when it named or quoted a parent, or reported a concrete parent action — a move, a commute, a switch, etc. Operator statements, waitlists, rankings, and “tuition-free” language do not by themselves establish parent action. This field is exploratory: it did not reach a publishable reliability threshold and tests no hypothesis (see 4.1 and 5.5).

Reachability constraints on reliability draws are as stated in §3.

4.1 Reliability

Each field was coded first-pass by a human coder and then independently re-coded by a large language model (Claude Opus 5) on the subset of stories whose full text could be retrieved live. Reliability requires both coders to read the same source text, so stories that could not be independently re-fetched — some AZ Central (paywall) and some 12News URLs (fetch blocks) — are excluded from the agreement estimates, which is why the reliability n is smaller than the corpus n .

On the live-body subset ($n = 17$), agreement was $\kappa = 0.79$ for ESA valence and $\kappa = 0.77$ for harm attribution, in both cases after adjudicating the construct rules above. Adding seven separately-supplied 12News texts to the harm set ($n = 24$) lowers agreement to $\kappa = 0.63$; we report the live-body figure as primary because those seven could not be drawn under the same retrieval protocol, and we flag the lower value here rather

than omit it. An earlier 24-story set was used to develop the harm rules and is not a reliability sample; its post-adjudication agreement (18 of 24) is a development artifact, not a κ . The charter-as-option field never reached $\kappa \geq 0.70$ and is reported as exploratory only. The policy corpus' primary-frame field is reported as descriptive and was not dual-coded for reliability.

5. Findings

5.1 Who is assigned the harm

Table 2 gives the attribution result. On the charter corpus, the most common assigned party is by far the charter operator: 52 of 97 stories (54 percent). That understates the concentration among stories that actually assign a harm — of the 73 charter stories that name any responsible party, the operator is that party in 52 (71 percent).

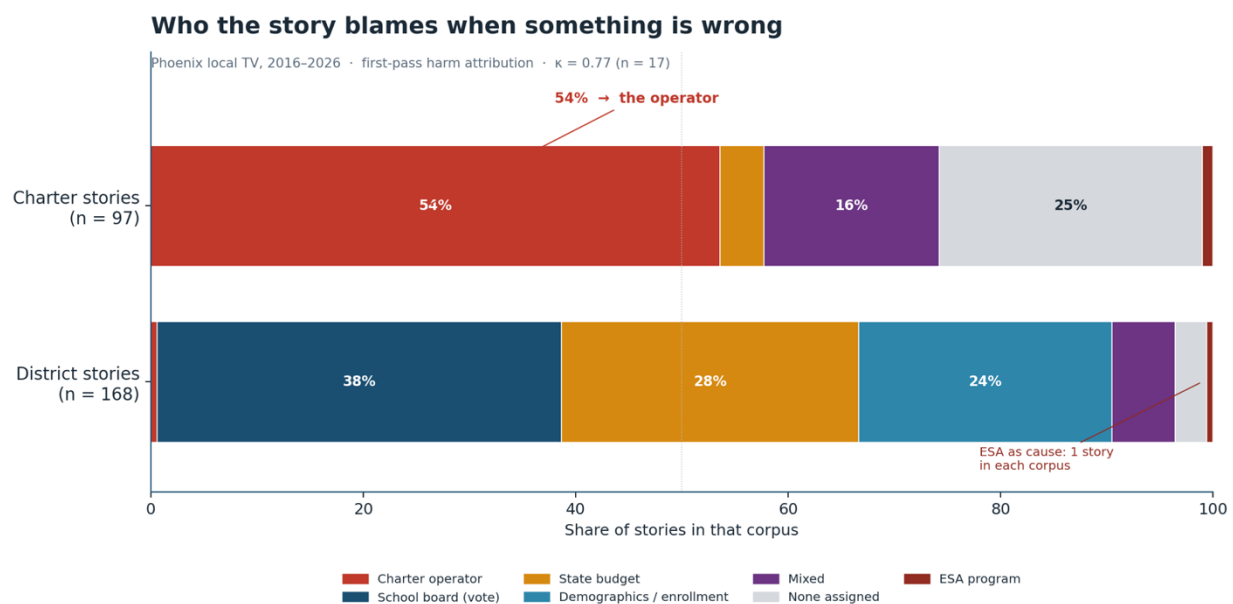
On the district corpus, responsibility is spread across three parties: the school board that acted (64 of 168, 38 percent), the state budget (47, 28 percent), and demographics or enrollment shift (40, 24 percent). The board is the single most common party but not a majority; taken together, the two largest non-board causes, state budget and demographics, account for 52 percent.

The two sectors also differ in whether a harm is assigned at all. Nearly every district story carries an attributable harm (only 3 percent are coded none), against a quarter of charter stories (25 percent none). District coverage is the more uniformly harm-framed of the two before any responsibility is assigned. The ESA program is coded as a cause of harm in just two of 265 institution stories, and neither parent nor local voters is assigned harm anywhere in the first-pass codes.

Assigned party	District (n=168)	District %	Charter (n=97)	Charter %
School board (voted to close)	64	38.1	0	0
Charter operator	1	0.6	52	53.6
State budget	47	28.0	4	4.1
Demographics / enrollment	40	23.8	0	0
Mixed	10	6.0	16	16.5

Assigned party	District (n=168)	District %	Charter (n=97)	Charter %
None assigned	5	3.0	24	24.7
ESA program	1	0.6	1	1.0
Parent	0	0	0	0
Local voters	0	0	0	0

Table 2. Harm attribution by sector, first-pass codes.



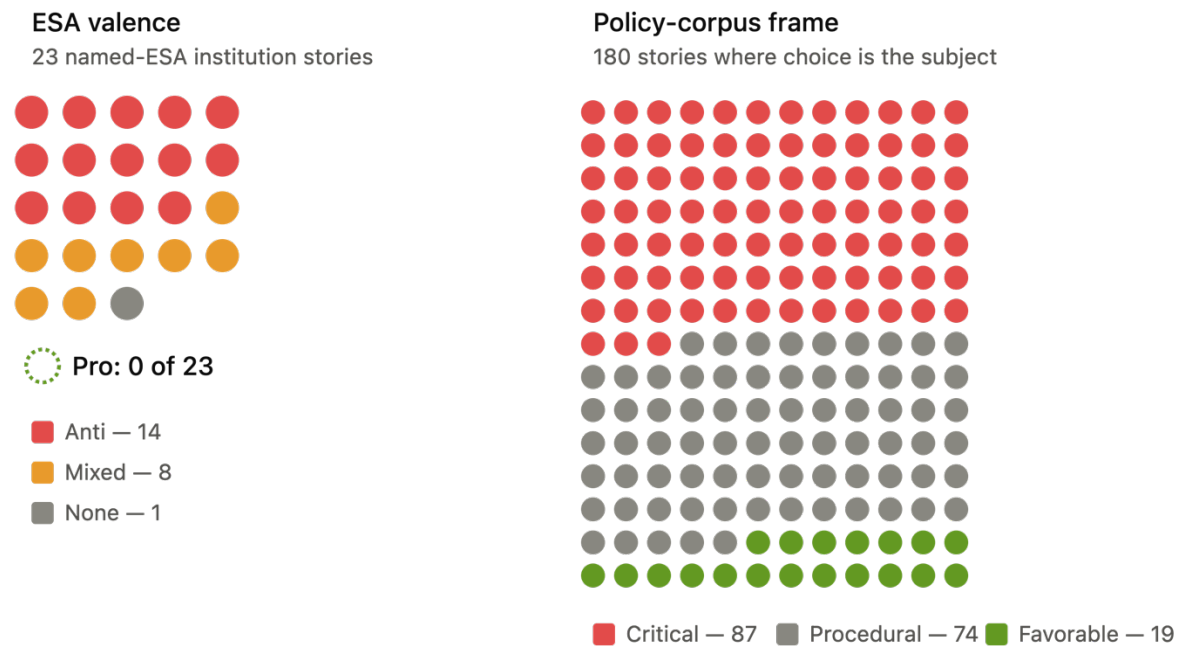
Source: AZ TV institution corpora, sheets 10 (n=168) and 15 (n=97). "School board" = voted closure or its aftermath (Rule A). Parent and local voters = 0 in both corpora. Not a valence chart: this is assigned responsibility for a harm on the page.

5.2 Story choice

Attribution follows what the news desk chose to air. District coverage is dominated by closures (60), Red for Ed (32), budget cuts (18), and receivership (17). Charter coverage is dominated by oversight reform (14), expansion (13), closure or revocation (11), fraud indictments (10), related-party dealings (9), and executive pay (9). Expansion and performance stories do exist in the charter data — 21 rows combined — but they are not the sector’s modal story. That selection imbalance is a finding in its own right.

District topic	n	Charter topic	n
Closure	60	Oversight reform	14
Red for Ed	32	Expansion	13
Budget cuts	18	Closure / revocation	11
Receivership	17	Fraud indictment	10
Override / bond	14	Related-party dealings	9
Teacher pay	9	Executive pay	9
Safety & governance	7	Performance	8
Enrollment	4	Safety & governance	6

Table 3. Most common primary topic by sector.



5.3 ESA valence in institution coverage, named-ESA stories only

ESA or voucher language appears in only 23 of the 265 institution stories — 16 on the district side and 7 on the charter side. Among those 23, valence is 14 anti, 8 mixed, 1 none, and 0 pro. How ESA policy is framed when it is the subject, rather than glimpsed in 23 institution stories, is the policy corpus’s question, taken up in §5.4.

ESA valence	District (16 named)	Charter (7 named)	Combined (23)
Anti	10	4	14
Mixed	5	3	8
None	1	0	1
Pro	0	0	0

Table 4. ESA valence among named-ESA stories only.

5.4 How the policy corpus frames ESAs and choice

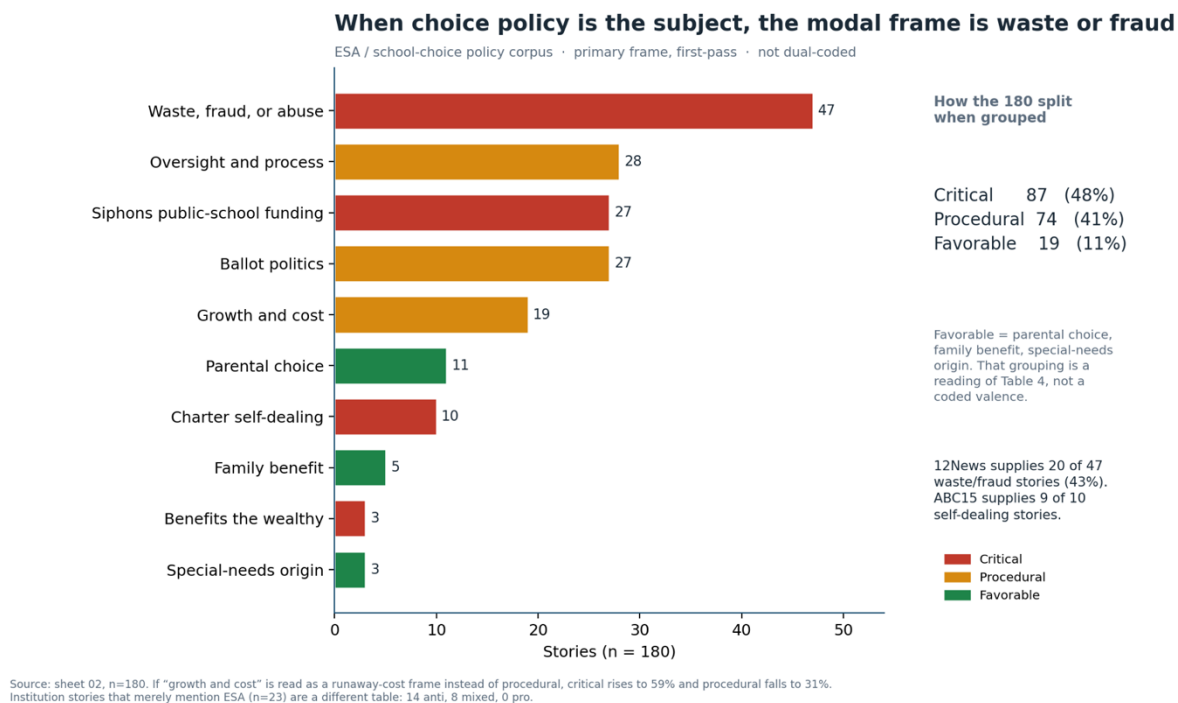
The institution corpora say little about ESAs directly (23 stories, per §5.3) because their subject is schools, not the program. The policy corpus (n = 180) is where ESA / choice policy is covered at volume. It is coded not for valence but for the single dominant frame each story carries, across ten categories. Table 4 gives the distribution.

Primary frame	n	%
Waste, fraud, or abuse	47	26.1
Oversight and process	28	15.6
Siphons public-school funding	27	15.0
Ballot politics	27	15.0
Growth and cost	19	10.6
Parental choice	11	6.1
Charter self-dealing	10	5.6
Family benefit	5	2.8
Benefits the wealthy	3	1.7
Special-needs origin	3	1.7
Total	180	100

Table 4. Primary frame in the policy corpus (sheet 02, n = 180). Percentages sum to 100 with rounding.

The modal frame is waste, fraud, or abuse, which carries a quarter of all policy stories (47, 26 percent); more than the next two frames combined. Below it the corpus splits into two registers. Procedural coverage, oversight and process (28), ballot politics (27), and growth and cost (19), accounts for 74 stories (41 percent) and treats choice as a matter of rules, elections, and budget arithmetic rather than merit. Frames that put choice in a favorable light, parental choice (11), family benefit (5), and the program's special-needs origin (3), together account for 19 stories, roughly one in nine. Critical frames, waste or fraud, siphoning of public-

school funding, charter self-dealing, and disproportionate benefit to the wealthy, account for 87 (48 percent).



These frames are not spread evenly across outlets, and the concentration is itself a finding. Waste, fraud, or abuse is disproportionately a 12News frame: 12News supplies 20 of the 47 such stories (43 percent) and gives that frame 41 percent of its own policy coverage (20 of 49), more than any other outlet. The charter self-dealing frame is almost entirely ABC15's; 9 of its 10 stories. Favorable framing, scarce everywhere, is the least evenly held of all: 12News runs no parental-choice stories, while FOX10 carries five of the corpus's eleven and devotes 18 percent of its policy coverage to that frame, the only outlet at which a favorable frame is prominent. The aggregate in Table 4 is therefore partly a composition effect: it reflects which desks cover choice policy most heavily, not a single outlet's style shared across the market.

This corroborates the institution finding rather than complicating it. §5.3 showed that among the 23 institution stories that name ESAs, none was favorable; here, across 180 stories that cover choice policy as their primary subject, favorable framing is again a small minority, roughly one story in nine. The scarcity of favorable choice framing is visible whether the object is 23 incidental mentions or the full ESA/choice corpus.

Two coding notes bound that reading. The favorable/critical/procedural grouping is an interpretive lean, not a coded valence, and it turns on two judgment calls: growth and cost is treated here as procedural, but read as a runaway-cost frame it becomes critical, which would raise the critical share to 59 percent and

lower procedural to 31; and charter self-dealing frames the charter sector rather than ESAs as such. The distribution in Table 4 is the coded result; the grouping is a reading of it.

5.5 Charter as option (exploratory)

Under the parent-action rule, the charter corpus contains four stories that show a parent choosing or acting; the district corpus contains none. A negative code is common on charter stories (51 of 97), because the modal charter story is an operator investigation, not a family. This field has no publishable reliability statistic and tests no hypothesis.

6. Discussion

Phoenix local news institution coverage does not treat district and charter schools as interchangeable. When the harm is within or relative to a charter school, the blamed party is usually a named operator. When the harm is a district closure, the blamed party is usually the board that voted or the state that funds the district.

The same data does not show that the news desks use ESAs as the default cause of district decline. Most district school closure copy never names a choice program. When a program is named, valence is anti or mixed, not pro ($n=23$). The policy corpus reinforces rather than revises this finding: across 180 stories that treat choice as their subject, favorable framing is again roughly one story in nine, so the scarcity of pro framing is not an artifact of the small institution-mention denominator.

7. Limitations

This is a Phoenix-area market study of stories that were published on the internet as text on four television sites and, in a thinner print slice, *The Arizona Republic*. This is not a study of Arizona media, of broadcast packages as they aired, or of the Republic's print investigations that television news often report on. The unit studied is the posted article. A news desk that led a six-o'clock block with a live shot and posted a four-paragraph recap is coded from the recap posted on their website.

The reliability figures in the abstract, $\kappa = 0.77$ on harm attribution and $\kappa = 0.79$ on ESA valence, are computed on seventeen reachable television bodies. They exclude every Arizona Republic row and every 12News URL that blocked the second coder. That is not a small omission. The Republic accounts for fifteen of the 180 policy stories, fifty of the 168 district stories, and thirty-six of the ninety-seven charter stories. However, those 101 rows have first-pass codes. They do not have a second independent reading of the full text, excepting two district school stories where full text was available. This study, therefore, cannot treat the Republic series as validated at the same standard as ABC15 or FOX10, and it cannot claim that the

missing 12News bodies were a random draw. If those blocked stories are systematically the sting and audit pieces the crawler could not fetch, the published kappas are estimated on an easier subset.

Several categories do less work than their labels suggest, and one published number is not a coded field at all. State-budget, as written, is appropriations. A superintendent who reclassifies grades, a legislature that will not release oversight money, and a charter board that declines to revoke sit in the same draft with no separate state-official value. Closures still under consideration, and board votes that cut staff rather than campuses, do not trigger district attribution.