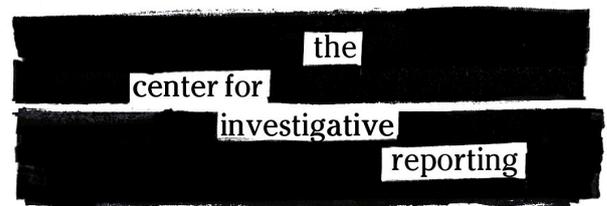


The Seattle Times Education Lab: How coverage of school discipline shifted public discourse



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Key Findings

1. While Education Lab did not introduce issues around school discipline to the political arena or public debate in Washington state, it did intensify a public conversation on alternative approaches to it, especially in community and ethnic media in the Seattle metro area.
2. The Seattle Medium, an African American publication, was consistently covering school discipline before the Education Lab series; the paper's coverage increased after the series ran.
3. The Seattle Education Association increased attention on school discipline after the Education Lab series ran.
4. The state's Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction did not significantly shift its framing of or focus on school discipline, which predates the Education Lab series by two years. However, it is possible that the series elevated the issue in broader public discourse in the Seattle metro area, thereby contributing to the opportunity for a task force convened by the state superintendent's office to recommend that schools adopt restorative justice practices.
5. The state House of Representatives addressed issues of school discipline with legislation in 2015. While the legislation predates the Education Lab series, elected officials reported that Seattle Times coverage of school discipline issues generated public support for reform and created the political opportunity for HB 1541 to pass.

I. Introduction

Media organizations often are credited with setting the agenda for public debate and changing or introducing frames for salient issues. But when does this occur, and what does a news organization have to do to substantively change the way an issue is framed?

This research project uses one case, that of the Education Lab collaboration between The Seattle Times and the Solutions Journalism Network, to examine these questions. Specifically, I look at how one Education Lab series contributed to a new and different public debate in the Seattle metropolitan area. I use content analysis to measure the shift in debate and the resonance of Education Lab's issue framing.

I find that Education Lab's sustained coverage of school discipline issues in the Seattle area, including the introduction of potential solutions, led to a new type of public conversation that included power holders (legislators), key stakeholders (teachers union members) and community members beyond The Seattle Times' traditional audience.

II. Introduction to the Education Lab school discipline series

A. Goals and coverage

Education Lab began as a collaboration between The Seattle Times and the Solutions Journalism Network. According to The Seattle Times: “Education Lab is a project of The Seattle Times that spotlights promising approaches to persistent challenges in public education. Our team reports on issues like improving school discipline, parent education, math instruction and more. Our goal? To connect parents, students and educators to drive innovative solutions.”

In multiple conversations over 36 months, both Education Lab and Solutions Journalism Network staff told me that a goal of the collaboration was to change the public discourse in the Seattle metro area, and specifically to introduce a less polarized, more productive conversation about solutions into public debate. They also said they wanted to bring parents, students and educators who were not necessarily traditional readers of The Seattle Times into the conversation.

In 2014, upon reflecting on successes and failures during the project’s first year, The Seattle Times decided to do sustained reporting on one issue in the education system: school discipline. The goal of this project was to bring more diverse stakeholders into the public conversation and introduce positive frames around solutions to Seattle’s school discipline challenges.

The Seattle Times’ Education Lab school discipline series included five main pieces of content:

- [Suspending kids doesn’t fix bad behavior; schools look for answers](#) (Dec. 5, 2014)
- [In school discipline, intervention may work better than punishment](#) (Jan. 24, 2015)
- [‘You are more than your mistakes’: Teachers get at roots of bad behavior](#) (May 16, 2015)
- [Race dramatically skews discipline, even in elementary school](#) (June 23, 2015)
- [Seattle schools may halt most suspensions for young kids](#) (June 25, 2015)

B. Content analysis

performed a content analysis of the Education Lab school discipline series to determine what words or couplets were most frequently used. The following distinctive couplets were the most frequently used:

Restorative justice (12)
School suspension (9)
School discipline (7)
Black students (7)

The most frequently used distinctive individual words were:

Discipline (45)
Suspension(-s, -ed) (73)
Restorative (21)

Topic modeling found three prevalent topics:

- School, students, kids, discipline, teachers, Seattle
- Restorative, San Francisco, justice, Levine, achievement
- Children, bemiss, knew, franky, team, trauma

The word cloud representation of prevalent topics makes clear that topic Nos. 1 and 2 are the topics most central to the Education Lab series.

Sentiment analysis of the corpus finds that “justice” and “achievement,” both positive, are clustered together thematically with restorative justice. This positive sentiment reflects the solutions journalism approach to reporting on the San Francisco school district’s successful implementation of restorative justice. The school discipline theme is neutral.

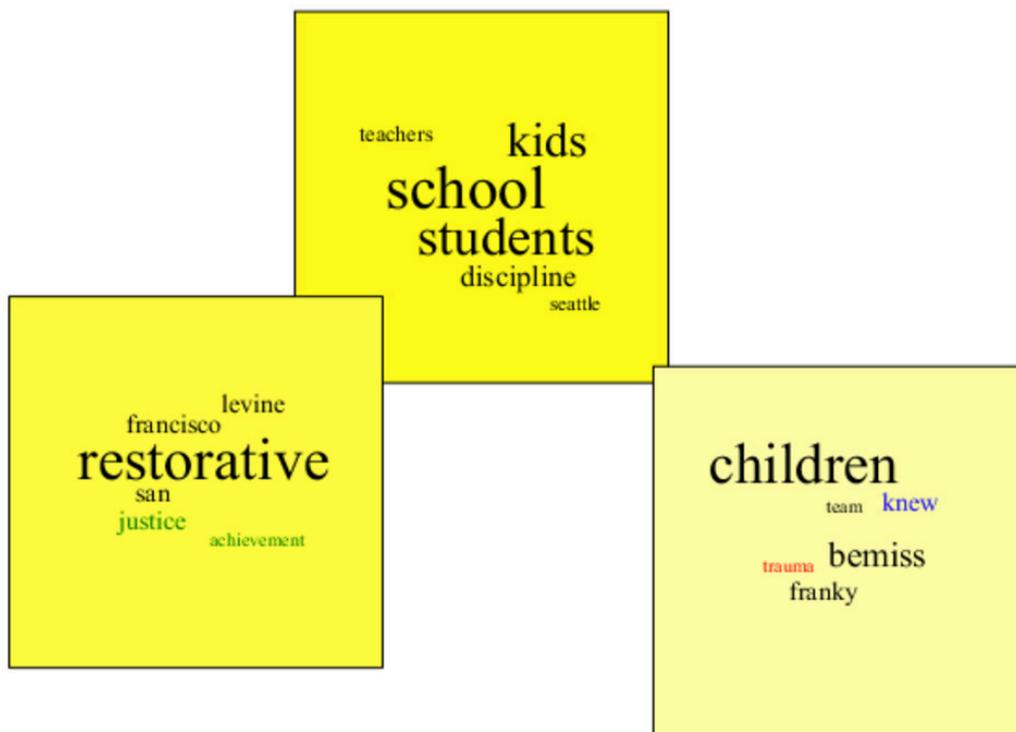


Figure 1: Topic model with sentiment analysis, Education Lab School Discipline Series.

III. Discourse change and diffusion

Based on the analysis of the Education Lab discipline series, the prevalent themes are:

1. School discipline
2. Restorative justice

In this section, I employ content analysis to examine:

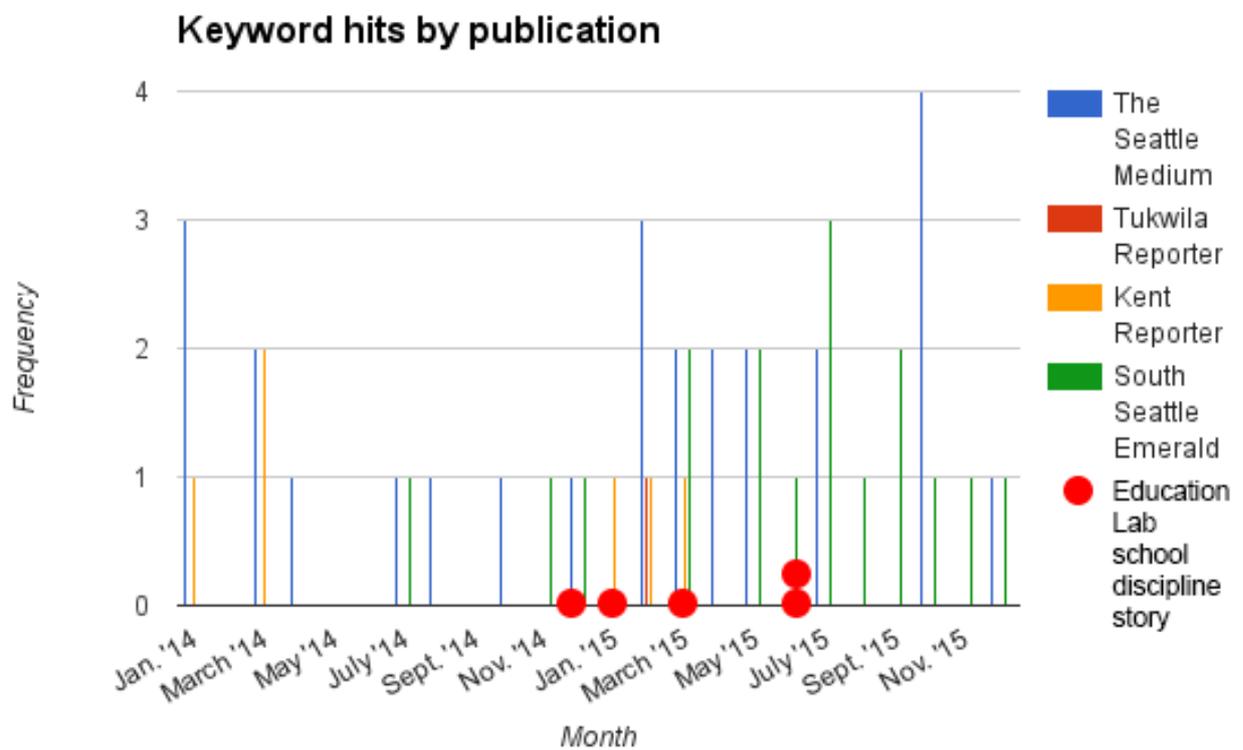
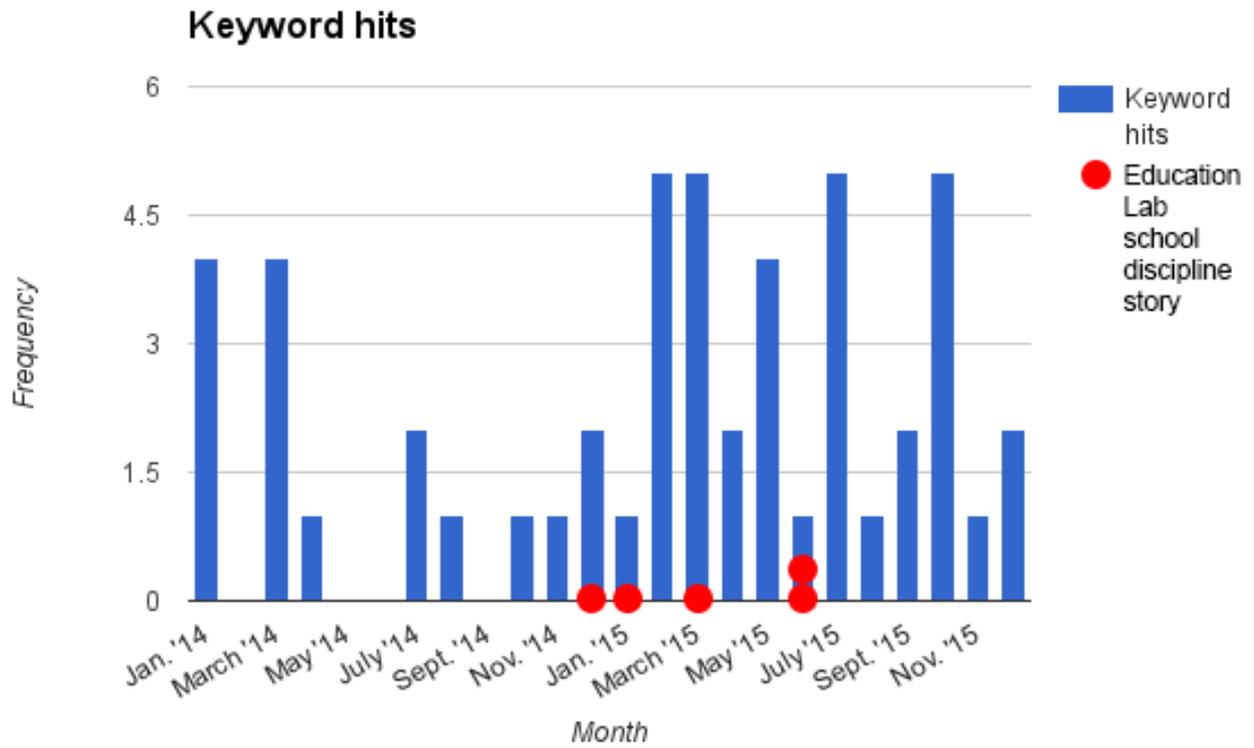
- A sample of community and ethnic media in the Seattle metro area
- Seattle teachers union newsletters
- Washington state House of Representatives bill analyses
- The State Senate Early Learning & K-12 Education Committee

A. Community and ethnic media

In order to determine whether Education Lab's school discipline series generated a broader conversation or changed an existing one, I conducted a keyword search of six community and ethnic media outlets in the Seattle metro area: the South Seattle Emerald, the Kent Reporter, the Tukwila Reporter, the Tacoma Daily Index, the Bellevue Reporter and The Seattle Medium¹. The keywords used were: "restorative justice," "school discipline" and "school suspension." I also searched for "Seattle Times" and "Education Lab" to look for general coverage of the project. Hits from 2014 and 2015 were recorded and analyzed.

In total, there were 16 keyword hits from these six outlets in 2014. This number increased to 24 in 2015. Of these outlets, the South Seattle Emerald and The Seattle Medium had the vast majority of stories with Education Lab keywords present.

¹ The Seattle Medium is a product of Tiloben Publishing Co. Inc., the largest African American-owned and -operated communications company in the Pacific Northwest.



The Seattle Medium covered issues of school discipline and restorative justice most consistently over the course of the two years analyzed in this paper. Given that African American students are most affected by the issues surrounding school discipline, this is not surprising. But the paper’s coverage of these issues significantly increased in 2015.

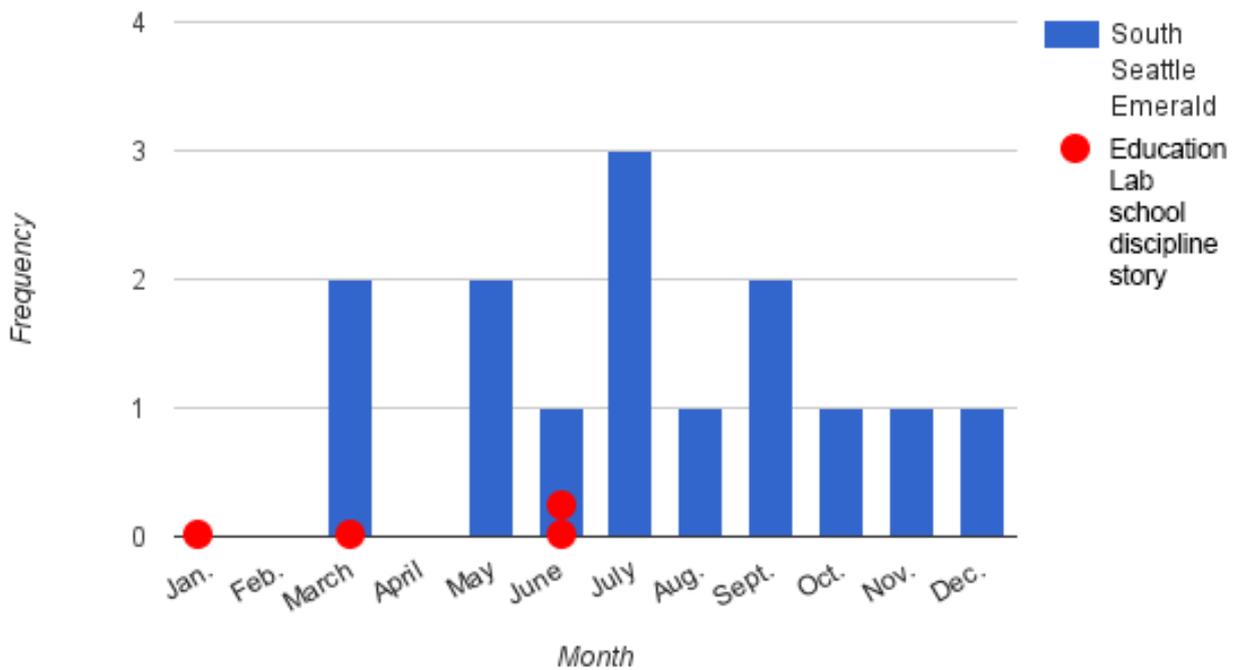
However, it is difficult to attribute this increased coverage to the Education Lab series. The Seattle Medium publishes many nationally syndicated columns, many of which discussed issues of restorative justice and school discipline in 2015. This was a national issue, especially in the wake of the fatal police shooting in Ferguson, Missouri, and other national incidents that brought attention to racial disparities in the U.S., such as the lack of access to quality education for black students.

To determine the potential effect of increased

national media attention to issues around school discipline on The Seattle Medium’s increased coverage of the topic, I conducted keyword searches for the three main couplets in LexisNexis’ national newspapers aggregated search. There were slight increases in 2015 over 2014 in the frequency of “school discipline,” “restorative justice” and “school suspension.” However, these increases are not significant², suggesting that the increased local focus, including by Education Lab, on school discipline in greater Seattle in 2015 contributed to an opportunity for The Seattle Medium to report on this issue even more consistently than it had in 2014.

The South Seattle Emerald’s increase in coverage of school discipline issues is more likely to be related to the Education Lab series and audience engagement. The Emerald reported heavily on community activities around restorative justice, including student mobilization at Rainier Beach High School, one of the focal points of the Education Lab series.

South Seattle Emerald keyword hits, 2015



² “School discipline” (2014, 318; 2015, 321); “restorative justice” (2014, 533; 2015, 550); “school suspension” (2014, 1,662; 2015, 1,751).

B. Teachers union

Content analysis of the Seattle Education Association's "Unity" newsletter finds that the union incorporated the topic of school discipline into its newsletter in 2015³. In 2014, the union used the word "discipline" once and the words "suspension" and "restorative justice" zero times.

In 2015, the newsletter used "suspension" eight times, "discipline" six times and "restorative justice" zero times. However, the newsletter did mention the "opportunity gap" six times in 2015; it was not mentioned in 2014. Upon deeper examination, I found that the suspension mentions were about the return of a teacher who had been suspended for 10 days by Superintendent Larry Nyland. Newsletters in the months following Education Lab's discipline series (April, February, May and September 2015) mentioned school discipline in the context of an opportunity gap for disadvantaged students.

This analysis suggests that the Education Lab series set a public agenda around school discipline that the union responded to by incorporating the issue into its own public discourse. However, the union did not engage in a conversation about restorative justice, a central element to the Education Lab series. The union also did not discuss school discipline as frequently as it did its core topic areas, such as Seattle schools in general, teacher working conditions, school start times and student performance.

C. Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction⁴

The state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction is the primary agency charged with overseeing K-12 public education in Washington. I analyzed all of the agency's reports to the state Legislature in 2014 and 2015 to determine whether it had shifted its focus on or framing of school discipline.

I found that there was no significant shift in attention to or framing of school discipline that can be attributed to the Education Lab project. The state Legislature called for a discipline task force in 2013 to "develop standard definitions for causes of student disciplinary actions taken at the discretion of the school district."⁵ The

3 Newsletters analyzed were obtained from the Seattle Education Association website and through the cooperation of the union.

4 The documents analyzed were taken from the [Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction website](http://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=28A.600.490).
5 <http://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=28A.600.490>

task force, convened by the state superintendent's office, undertook a research and analysis project throughout 2013 and 2014. Members presented their findings to the Legislature in the "Student Discipline Task Force Final Report" in 2015.⁶ This report identifies "restorative practices" as an "additional effective strategy" to replace a punitive approach to school discipline. The task force recommends:

The Restorative Justice model should be part of professional development training for all school leaders and certificated staff and serious consideration given to implementing the model in all districts.

While the task force predates Education Lab's school discipline series, it is possible that the series elevated the issue in broader public discourse in the Seattle metro area, thereby contributing to the opportunity for the report to recommend that schools adopt restorative justice practices.

D. Washington House of Representatives⁷

Washington House of Representatives The state House of Representatives makes public the text of all legislation that goes to the floor for a vote, as well as analyses of all legislation provided to representatives. I analyzed the full corpus of bill analyses to determine if and how any references to or framing of school discipline changed between the 2013-14 and 2015-16 sessions.⁸

6 <http://www.k12.wa.us/studentdiscipline/pubdocs/StudentDisciplineTaskForceFinalReport2015.PDF>

7 The documents analyzed were taken from a [state government](#) list of all bills and analyses.

8 The corpus of analysis of legislation for the Washington House of Representatives in 2013 and 2014 includes 5,387 documents. All were included in this analysis.

References to "student discipline" and "discipline policies" increased in 2015-16 when compared with 2013-14, and references to "restorative justice" increased dramatically (from zero to 71).

All references to student discipline and discipline policies occurred in 2015, including [HB 1541](#). While this bill analysis was provided in February 2015, the House Education Committee's work began in 2009. This bill ultimately was signed into law in March 2016. While the bill touches upon many of the issues presented in the Education Lab series – such as prohibiting long-term suspension, requiring cultural competence training for educators dealing with student discipline and setting new requirements for the gathering of data on school discipline – the committee's work predates Education Lab's coverage.

However, state Rep. [Lillian Ortiz-Self, D-Mukilteo](#), told Seattle Times reporter Claudia Rowe that that the bill's success – after five years of languishing in committee – was a result of The Times' coverage of the issue. Ortiz-Self said: "This had been hovering for a while, but after your story ran we had more outcry from parents than ever before. Communities were saying, 'That's enough, you can't do this anymore. You can't keep kicking kids out and not providing them an education.' "

So while the Education Lab school discipline series did not put school discipline reform on the political agenda, it did contribute to an environment in which public support for reform grew, creating the opportunity for politicians to pass reform.

While references to “restorative justice” increased dramatically in the time period following Education Lab’s series, closer examination finds that the house analyses including this phrase were referring to four pieces of legislation that deal with the juvenile justice system, not the education system ([HB 1505](#), [HB 2906](#), [HB 5605](#) and [HB 6529](#)).

E. Washington Senate Early Learning & K-12 Education Committee⁹

I analyzed all reports and publications made public by the state Senate Early Learning & K-12 Education Committee.

In 2014, there were 10 mentions of “student discipline,” four of which were in direct reference to the task force convened by the state superintendent’s office and the remaining six being general comments on the topic. There were no specific mentions of restorative justice or school suspension. Student discipline was not one of the top 10 topics in the documents analyzed for 2014.

In 2015, the number of mentions of “student discipline” by the Early Learning & K-12 Education Committee jumped to 45. However, all of these mentions were within one document, a memo on the Student Discipline Interim Project. This project, which began in 2014, summarizes state and federal legislation about school discipline, as well as recent reports on the topic. The memo has one reference to “restorative justice” in which it summarizes a Colorado law that requires schools to include restorative justice as one alternative form of student discipline.

In 2015, there also was a significant increase in the number of times “suspension/suspended” was used (12); however, it was not consistently used together with another word to create a meaningful couplet, meaning it was not necessarily being used in the context of school suspension. Discipline is one of the top 10 topics included in public material from the committee.

Thus, while references to school discipline increased in 2015, the work that went into these reports began years earlier. This suggests that the Senate Early Learning & K-12 Education Committee’s attention to student discipline pre-dates The Seattle Times’ Education Lab series.

⁹ The documents analyzed were taken from the Washington Senate Early Learning & K-12 Education Committee website.

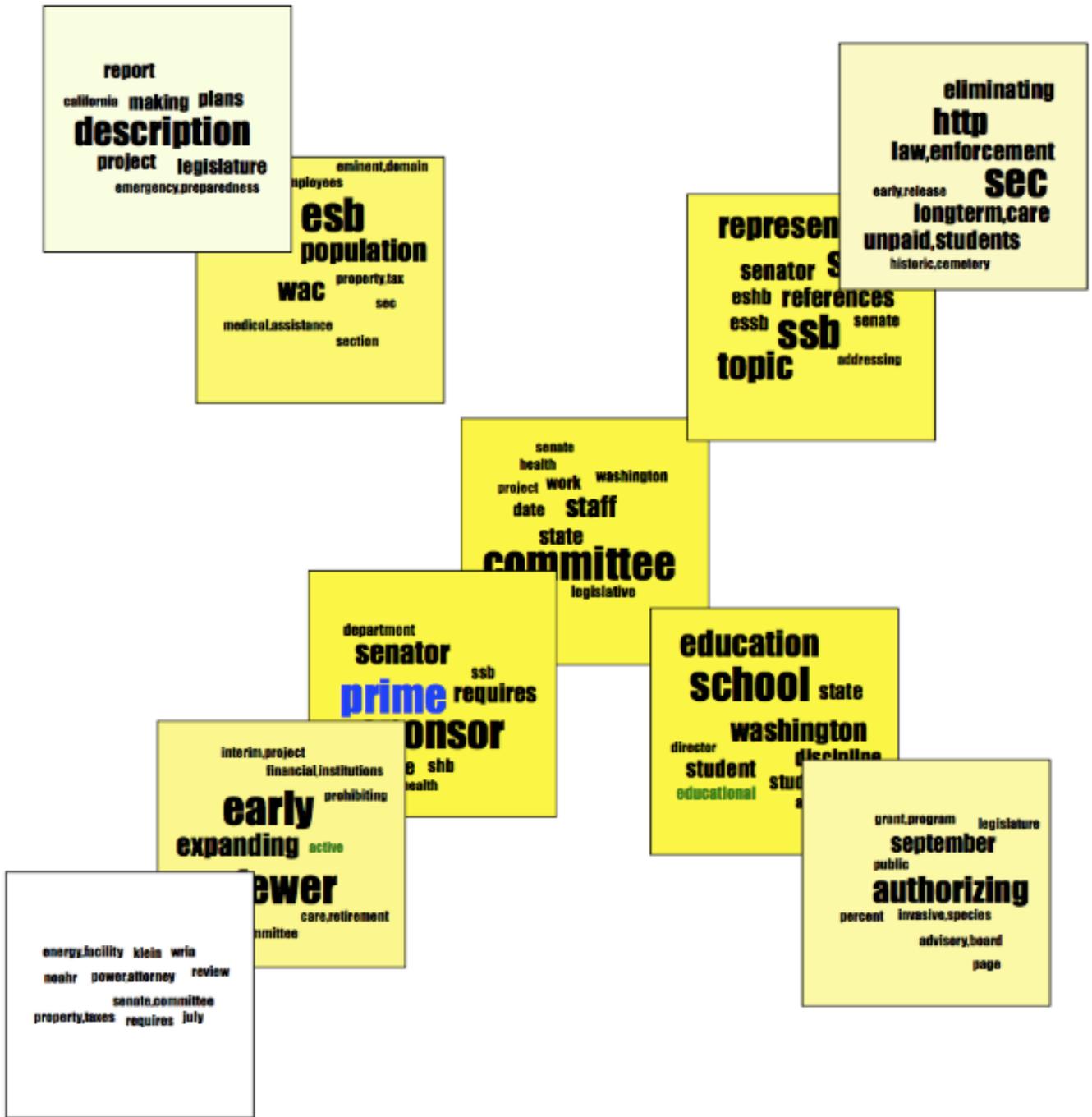


Figure 2: Topic model with sentiment analysis of Washington Senate Early Learning & K-12 Education Committee, 2015.

IV. Conclusions

Policymakers and power holders in the education arena had school discipline on their agendas prior to The Seattle Times' Education Lab series. However, the analysis presented here suggests that the series contributed to an increase in public conversation about school discipline in the Seattle metro area, as evidenced by increased local and ethnic media coverage of the issue. Furthermore, the introduction of alternative discipline practices, such as restorative justice, into the public conversation may have increased the opportunity for these issues to become a more central part of the conversation than might have otherwise been possible. Ultimately, politicians reported that this increased opportunity allowed them to pass legislation that previously had not had the support to move out of committee.