

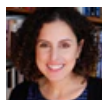
## Interviews with Influencers: POLITICO Morning Education Team



### Interviews *with* **INFLUENCERS**

**POLITICO  
MORNING ED TEAM**

*Kim Hefling, Ben Wermund and  
Michael Stratford*



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Chances are if you're an education wonk in the DMV, or really anywhere across the country, you've come to rely on the *POLITICO* Morning Education newsletter ([subscribe here!](#)) as a go-to resource for top education news. So we thought it would be fun to flip the script on one of our favorite education reporting teams for our first interview of 2019. The conversation with Kim Hefling, Ben Wermund, and Michael Stratford was a blast, and I can't say we were surprised to learn all three started out their journalism careers at their college newspapers. Enjoy!

**Q: Talk about your journey into becoming a reporter. How did you find your way to the education beat?**

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A. MICHAEL STALLONE (MS) – I've always been a very curious person, and have been interested in holding people and institutions accountable. I was very active in my college newspaper, *The Cornell Daily Sun*, which, fun fact, is the oldest continuously independent daily college newspaper in the country! I loved it and decided to pursue a career in journalism. As far as education goes, I sort of fell into it. I've always been interested in writing about politics and policy and found my way into education through an internship at *The Chronicle of Higher Education* shortly after I graduated from college. The Chronicle was a great place to complete an internship. They provided a lot of opportunities and support to their interns, and at the end of my internship I subbed in temporarily for one of the main federal education policy reporters at the time (shout out to [@kfieldCHE!](#)). I moved over briefly to the *Associated Press* (AP), and then worked at *Inside Higher Ed* for two years before finding my way to *POLITICO*. (Michael will be celebrating his 3<sup>rd</sup> anniversary on the *POLITICO Morning Ed* team in April).

Benjamin Wermund (BW): I worked on the student paper in high school and really wanted to write about music. Honestly, I imagined I'd be writing for *Rolling Stone* one day. I was doing a lot of features work, and writing for *The Daily Texan* at the University of Texas at Austin (which was NOT the oldest continuously independent college newspaper in the country!), and then I got a news internship at the *Austin American Statesman*, where I was responsible for covering a suburb just north of Austin that actually included my hometown— which was interesting. An opening came available in the downtown office and I was told I was going to be covering education in the district. Eventually, I moved to *The Houston Chronicle*, covering higher education before landing at *POLITICO*.

Kim Hefling (KH): I started out in journalism working at my high school newspaper. I attended a large public high school in Wichita, Kansas, and honestly, I never really stopped being a journalist after that. I went to Kansas State University, and at the time our daily paper, *The Collegian* had a circulation of about 14,000. We were actually one of the largest dailies in the whole state of Kansas. I worked there for all four years of college, and was the editor my senior year. Right after graduation, I got a job with the AP in Louisville, Kentucky. I was the editorial assistant and responsible for recording high school football scores on Friday nights. Eventually I moved out to Appalachia in Eastern Kentucky for two years where I writing about everything from poverty to homicides to tornadoes. You name it, I was writing about it. I later got into military reporting and made my way to Washington, DC in 2005. After our now eight year old was born, an opening came available at the AP to cover education. It was more of a K-12 beat, but that's how I got into education and journalism.

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**Q: Fill in the blank: If I wasn't covering**

## **Q: Fill in the blank: If I wasn't covering education, I'd be writing about \_\_\_\_\_.**

A: MS - This is a very stereotypical response, but I'd love to write about food. I read a lot of very bad food criticism. (*Michael's favorite DC restaurant in [The Dabney](#), and since you're nearby grab drinks at [The Columbia Room](#) too*).

BW - I would actually no longer want to write about music anymore. I follow a lot of music critics on Twitter and while they get free music sent to them in advance (which is obviously cool), it seems like a tough gig. I think I would actually really like to write about wildlife. I wrote a lot about that sort of stuff in my first couple of jobs (e.g., fights over an endangered salamander species in the Austin suburbs).

KH - Pretty much everything I've ever covered, or been told to cover eventually interests me. Once you learn about a subject matter, the issue, the players, it becomes pretty fascinating. Obviously in Washington, D.C. there's a lot going on, on Capitol Hill, and The White House, and Pentagon - that would be fun to cover. There's also so much going on in communities across the country right now, I think it could be a fascinating time to be in local journalism. There are truly stories everywhere. If you love journalism, there are so many things to write about, wherever you find yourself.

## **Q: What is your favorite story (to date) you've written? Why?**

A: MS - I feel like in general one type of story I really like is a story that goes against the grain of what the typical conversation on that topic area is. One of my favorite stories is actually one Kim and I worked on together a few years ago during the Obama administration about the sale of the University of Phoenix to a bunch of former investors who either worked for the Obama administration or had ties to the Obama administration ([read the story here](#)). And one thing I liked is that I'd previously been writing a lot about for-profit colleges, the policy and political clashes over the role of for-profit education, and how we crackdown on abuses in for-profit education. Frankly that debate had gotten a little tired. We started to hear the same voices from the same players, and one thing I liked about that story is it allowed us to take a different angle and expose some new and different political fault lines. You had these players from an administration that ostensibly didn't like for-profit colleges going to purchase one, and you had Republicans criticizing them for a conflict of interest type situation, while also at the same time they were largely in favor of for-profit colleges generally and didn't like the restraints the Obama administration was putting on them. So that was a good chance to sort of flip the script a little on the for-profit education world. It's always exciting as a journalist when you're calling someone or asking someone for a comment and you have no idea what their answer is going to be. And unfortunately a lot of times in the slow-moving education

their answer is going to be. And unfortunately a lot of times in the slow-moving education policy debates, you already know what people are going to say. And if I know what they're going to say ahead of time, our readers know what they're going to say. So, it's nice to be able to take a fresh approach to a story.

BW - It's a tough question to answer because I can think of stories that I've written everywhere I've worked that I've liked a lot. I think probably my favorite story I've written at *POLITICO* is a story I did last year about The University of Michigan ([read here](#)). I originally went to Michigan because I learned the school had pretty low numbers of low-income student enrollment, and I wanted to learn why that was. What I didn't expect was to learn about the newly developed [HAIL Scholars Program](#) (shout out to [@Dynarski](#)). I got an early look at the work of the program through this reporting, and it's great to see that the results from the initial program findings are really positive.

KH - It's been really fascinating to watch the Trump and Betsy DeVos era and all their efforts to repeal things we covered during the Obama era. In terms of my career, one of the most interesting beats I've done is when I was covering the US Military home front beat during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, and things were really intense. You could really see how actions in Washington, DC were impacting the lives of a lot of people. There were a lot of wounded veterans and military war widows who let me into their homes and really showed me how policies were impacting their lives. I did that beat for quite a while, and it was really fascinating. And then I would go on Capitol Hill and see how lawmakers were making decisions, oftentimes influenced by what they were reading in the paper. I enjoyed that beat a lot because you saw a strong connection between the policy and the individuals it was impacting.

## **Q: In 10 words or less, describe the biggest issue in our nation's higher ed system.**

A: MS - I actually spent a lot of time thinking about this. Cost of college; lack of completion; political polarization. *(KH: Of course Michael did his homework!)*

BW - Students don't know what opportunities are available to them (e.g., the HAIL Scholars Program).

KH - I've been writing about the issues in K-12 funding, but they're totally connected to higher ed. What are the ramifications of these shifts downwards in public education funding? We're seeing it play out right now in the K-12 space, but the higher education world is being squeezed just as much.

**Q: What is the most outrageous pitch you've**

## **Q: What is the most outrageous pitch you've ever received?**

A: MS - There are literally so many.

BW - I get a lot of product pitches. Some related to education and some not.

MS - I feel like there was a period of time where it was all about the apps. We know this is true not just in education, but there's truly an app for everything. So I'd get a lot of requests to write about new apps on the market. The product pitches are the most ridiculous that I almost can't think of anything else.

KH - I haven't seen this in a while since I've been writing about education for some time, but people switch beats with some regularity and for a while it would be common to get pitches for a beat I hadn't covered in years. I find it surprising that people doing the pitching don't do just a little bit of homework to learn what we're covering. But don't get me wrong, I really like receiving pitches - our whole team does!

BW - Agreed! I'd rather have more pitches than none.

MS - Sometimes the construction of the pitch, not the product of report that's being pitched itself is what's the oddest. For example: "Dear Matt - Given your coverage of federal higher education policy and student loans, I thought you'd be interested in this company that develops an app that lets you watch pandas at the zoo."

BW - I've also been getting pitches about celebrity appearances recently. I'm assuming these folks are showing up to education-related events. Like Michael B. Jordan for example (star of *Creed*, *Fantastic Four*, and *The Wire*). I've gotten at least 3 emails about that.

MS - I have lots of sympathy for people who are trying to pitch.

## **Q: What was your biggest career blunder?**

A: MS - I think humans are very good at blocking out blunders and mistakes. So I've got nothing.

BW - I was covering my hometown county and got the name of a river wrong. I just made up the name of a river there, that I suppose I grew up thinking was the proper name for it and it was not even remotely correct. Sam Bass was the name of a pioneer in the area (*a 19<sup>th</sup>-century American Old West train robber to be exact*), and a lot of things nearby were named for him. So I just thought the name of the river was the Sam Bass River. I wrote it into the story and received so many emails from readers about it.

KH - We've all made mistakes. I can't really think of anything big aside from spelling errors at

KH - WE'VE ALL MADE MISTAKES. I CAN'T REALLY THINK OF ANYTHING BIG ASIDE FROM SPELLING ERRORS at the moment.

## **Q: What e-newsletters or daily digests do you subscribe to? Education or otherwise.**

MS - I'm biased, but I think the other *POLITICO* policy newsletters our colleagues produce are really good. Even for people that aren't experts in that field. It's helpful too because often there's overlap in the policy world and staying up on what our colleagues in other policy areas are writing about helps me to think about if we should be covering some aspect of that issue area on the education beat as well. I also read *Inside Higher Ed's* morning compilation of news ([subscribe here](#)) which I think is really well done. Really all of the competitor's newsletters are worthwhile. I really like *The Daily 202*, which is a good digest of things happening. To be honest, I'm so overwhelmed in the morning by the deluge of things in my inbox that I don't often read the daily newsletters.

BW - I read *The Chronicle of Higher Ed*, and *Insider Higher Ed*. I also like the [Capital Weather Gang](#) - I read them every morning. I recently signed up for a new music newsletter - [Indie Mixtape](#) - it's good. A mix of links to different songs, and background on the artist.

KH: I have an RSS feed (*if that term is new to you, learn more [here](#)*), which helps me stay on top of all the local education news that's happening. [Huddle](#) is really good at *POLITICO*. I read the AP app a lot - where you can search by topic. We keep up with a lot of state education trends and there are a lot of good things popping up there that you wouldn't always see elsewhere. (*MS agrees that's one of the best hidden secrets of the education reporting trade*).