



Learning from Legislators: the Ohio Case Study

A FrameWorks Research Report

Prepared for The Frameworks Institute

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Introduction & Background

This report builds on the National Scientific Council's ongoing project to forge productive ties with state legislators who are in a position to bring about significant change in areas relevant to the welfare and development of young children. Previous research conducted by the FrameWorks Institute research partners has included discussions (in interview and focus group formats) with legislators in Arizona, Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire and Rhode Island, and has investigated such topics as the kinds of messages that are most effective with legislators, the messengers they turn to and trust, the ways in which information is shared in the legislative context, the ways in which priorities are set, and the communications settings that are most conducive to productive exchanges between experts/advocates and legislators/staff.

This case study reports on a supplementary round of interview data gathered with state legislators in Ohio. We gratefully acknowledge the generous assistance of Voices for Children of Greater Cleveland and the Community Solutions Project who allowed us to include questions in their interviews with lawmakers (in the context of their separate research effort) and to view the transcripts of those conversations in their entirety. These questions were developed by Cultural Logic and administered by the Community Solutions Project. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and subjected to cognitive analysis. (For more on the method of analysis, see the Methods section at the end of this report.) While this project represents a departure from our normal research process, our degree of involvement and control allows us to be confident that the data is credible and useful. It was only by being opportunistic in securing this data from a parallel project that we gained access to a state we would not otherwise have been able to study.

The interviews that are the basis of this memo were conducted with 17 legislators: 13 men and 4 women, comprising 7 Democrats, 8 Republicans and 2 unidentified by party affiliation. As in previous rounds of research with legislators, some among the Ohio group had a great deal of experience on children's issues, while others did not. Some were in leadership positions, while others were "rank and file."

Despite the fact that this research was not fully controlled by or integrated into the FrameWorks research process, it was felt that the Ohio research represented an important opportunity to confirm and contest findings from New England and Arizona – and from Council members' own experience with state legislators – and also afforded an opportunity to expand on certain important points. Wherever possible, findings from Ohio are placed in the context of this ongoing body of research.

1. Engaging the skeptical politician

State legislators work in an environment charged with political argument. They are very sensitive to the fact that information can be distorted, and scientific information is no exception. The research emphasizes that the Council needs to continue not only to define its role, but to craft its communications in ways that reassure legislators that the information comes from a reliable, objective, nonpartisan source.

Q: How important are scientists as a voice?

A: I think you have to be aware of special interest groups out there. And you really have to look at how did they come up with these reports, because you can make it sound good one way and another depending on what group you're with. As legislators, sometime we don't really have time to look at that so I'm just very hesitant.

Republican representative

Just because they're scientists doesn't mean they don't have their own agenda, their own bias. A lot of the educational researchers come from one particular political philosophy. And their results are generally tailored to meet their own political ends.

Republican representative

This skepticism about science that some legislators voice serves to emphasize the importance of framing information in ways that are least likely to trigger this kind of “Rhetorical Mode” response.

Various exchanges in the interviews confirmed that elected leaders are in a position that requires them to be extremely sensitive about communications. Rhetorical mode is the default, and only certain types of situations allow for reasonable mode. The identity of a messenger is one of the key factors, as is the context in which legislators are approached and familiarized with the science.

Q: How can we help you become more supportive of our initiatives?

A: I mean at some point I guess you'll let me know who you're working for and then I'll say whether I know them or not, OK?

Only later in the interview was the legislator able to “put a face” to the research being done:

Q: We work out of Columbus with Strategic Public Partners.

A: Strategic Public Partners, I've heard of them.

Q: Tom W-----.

A: Tommy W-----. Yeah OK. Yeah I've heard of them. Tom W----- I know him. Good guy.

Republican representative

2. Need for a Development Frame that transcends Health and Education

For various reasons, legislators tend strongly to think and act within particular domains. The conversations confirmed that the Early Investment Frame – i.e. the idea that there are significant benefits to investing early in the life cycle – is relatively effective as applied *within* the domains of Health and Education, for instance, where programs, policy track records, budget categories, and so forth are well established. It is easy to understand that pediatric health care improves *health* down the line. It's easy to see that “pre-school” programs can have positive outcomes in *school testing* later. It is also easier to act on that knowledge by creating and funding policies.

On the other hand, thinking and acting *across* these relatively narrow domains is much less natural in the legislative context, and is not supported by widely shared understandings nor by institutional structures.

I think one of our fundamental flaws, not just in this but in other issues that we've tackled is that we've failed to see them as integrated issues. We put on blinders. We deal with issues in a vacuum and don't understand that education will impact employment and employment will impact health care and health care will impact your taxation.

Democratic representative

Yet the logic of the Early Investment Frame, as the Council would like to promote it, relies on the fact that the implications of ECD are not confined to the domains of Health and Education and so on. Research shows that ECD programs can have an effect on incarceration rates or the economic health of communities, for instance. Currently, ECD programs are not conceptually or institutionally part of the legislative process for developing law enforcement policies, or economic development programs – and it wouldn't occur to most people (legislators) that they ought to be. Until this powerful pattern changes, legislators (and their constituents) will find it hard to take seriously the idea that the most important and cost-effective way to solve a problem like burgeoning prison populations is to invest in early childhood development programs.

In effect, as long as ECD remains ghetto-ized within the Education and Health domains, the Early Investment Frame remains seriously handicapped. Creating conceptual and institutional change of this kind obviously represents a long-term challenge to the Council, but one that no other group is better suited to address.

In many of its efforts, the Council is currently working to move the discussion of ECD into the domain of Economic (including Workforce) Development. This is a logical strategy with a great deal of potential.

But as opposed to tapping into well-established domains, another (potentially more challenging and rewarding) strategy would be the establishment of a policy domain such as Community Development or Citizenship Development, where many of the outcomes data are actually focused.

Effects like reducing teen pregnancies and incarcerations etc. do not group naturally under the headings, like Education and Health, that are currently most comfortable to legislators, and establishing a category where they do fit would be a major victory and contribution.

Money goes into the development of a child instead of the incarceration of an adult -- there is the trick. I think that's something that needs to be studied and looked at and prioritized. Early childhood development should be the key to changing the dramatic effect or skyrocketing cost of incarceration and the justice system.

Republican representative

The Council might also think of its contribution in terms of developing and promoting a measure that can compete with grades, educational attainment, IQ and salaries as a yardstick of how kids are doing in life.

Finding alternatives to school testing and health measures has to be a priority for broadening the range of outcomes that policy-makers could view as objective, quantitative and solidly grounded in empirical research.

It is also important to remember that legislators are unlikely to understand even the basic principles of Development that the Council is trying to convey, and that without these understandings, thinking does not move in the hoped-for directions. In the example below, the legislator has a sense that early intervention is a good thing, but the causal mechanisms, stigma and discouragement, are narrow and weak, and unlikely to lead to strong support for the right range of policies.

The longer you delay, the problem cascades over time. You will lose the child altogether. Because if they stay behind and suffer ridicule and stigma, at some point, usually around 8th 9th grade, they will stop going [to school] altogether until you lose them and they become a liability instead of an asset.

Democratic representative

If the problem is ridicule and stigma due to poor academic performance, then appropriate solutions might include tutoring, or school-wide campaigns on being nicer to classmates. These have little or nothing to do with the real messages about ECD and policy that the Council is working to disseminate.

3. Presenting information compellingly

Earlier rounds of FrameWorks research for the Council established that state legislatures are a particular kind of information environment where careful framing is crucial for two very important reasons. First, because only carefully crafted communications will

survive in the “Acid Bath” of this busy, charged, oral environment. Communications with legislators must anticipate the fact that information will be quickly reduced to “nuggets” – that may or may not resemble the original points Council members have tried to convey. This is because information in state legislatures is regularly translated to verbal exchanges and argument; it must survive in an environment of over-worked legislators of diverse backgrounds, many of whom are suspicious of all information that seems designed to change their minds. This means that in order to survive and have an impact, messages should include, and where possible be organized around, clear and vivid statements that capture the essence of the point that Council members are trying to convey. (See Cultural Logic’s elicitation report, as well as Public Knowledge’s focus group report, commissioned for the Council by the FrameWorks Institute.)

The average Legislator has . . . a short attention span, and they have a huge number of items to think about . . . what I think they need is a nuts and bolts kind of thing, and then a little bit more follow-up.

Democratic representative

The second reason careful framing is so important is that state legislatures have such a capacity to shape the public conversation about priorities and policies – communications with legislators therefore offer a tremendous opportunity for amplification that should not be missed. This opportunity is only maximized if legislators are offered communications tools that are most likely to succeed with their colleagues and constituents.

In this section, we offer the beginnings of a checklist for formulating information in ways that can help legislators consider and explain policies and craft persuasive policy arguments. This list is based not only on what legislators themselves say they need, but also on an analysis of specific ways that unsympathetic legislators manage to evade the implications of even well-established scientific findings.

a) Compelling at a glance

Since even sympathetic legislators are unlikely to become experts in the nuances of ECD, and since the most important scientific findings in this area may contradict deeply held understandings and challenges to people’s conceptual models, it takes a very careful communications design to craft information into a form that is *compelling at a glance*. As FrameWorks researchers have previously advised, key ideas should be in the form of *active chunks of information* – i.e. clear, concrete and memorable points that crystallize important insights.

Q: How can we help you become more supportive of these initiatives?

A: Periodically you could keep me abreast of any recent research that seems to be relevant. And just sending a bunch of papers won’t do it, because I’ll just pitch it. I don’t have time.

Republican representative

In the '03 budget they were trying to get rid of funding for [recruiting out-of-state] graduate students and instead of using these statistics to get across to the Legislature—my brother played for Ohio State football and so he said, “Could you imagine if Jim Tressell only got to recruit out of Ohio?” That’s how it got through to them!

Democratic representative

Analogies, metaphors, simplifying models and social math – the lexicon of Strategic Frame Analysis – are all strategies designed to package information in compelling forms.

b) Cause and Effect

Legislators are most hungry for “outcome-oriented” data that shows what kinds of results you get from particular actions or interventions. This is the single most pressing need that expert knowledge can serve. It is an obvious point on one level, but also one that can easily be lost track of, in the context of the effort to produce more general educational material about ECD.

Legislators understand that the best currency for changing the course of debate is cause-and-effect stories. Anything vague or “open to interpretation” has much less power to shift outcomes.

It’s important that we come up with answers that [are backed] by scientific information. If a child is treated in this manner then that child will be more productive and tend to be of a higher standard of living than if that child is left alone and not treated or educated or whatever that situation may be. The scientific end of it has a real benefit in that it may prove or disprove thoughts any particular legislator might have.

Republican representative

Intuitively we all understand [the importance of] educating the whole child, taking care of the child prior to the time they hit kindergarten. We get that. There should be a relationship between good programs that do that and results down the line in terms of academic achievement, going to college, getting a good job, and all the rest. There should be. And I say there should be because it makes sense. But if the data is there, I’ve never seen it.

Republican representative

Note that satisfying this desire does not have to mean providing empirical demonstrations of the effectiveness of particular policies – data which often may not yet exist. The cause-and-effect “hunger” can be satisfied by more general but well-crafted statements about developmental mechanisms and the kinds of interventions whose potential effects

Council members are confident about. Simplifying models, causal sequences, and frames that encourage people to see a dynamic, yet orderly process, should all be helpful tools for any legislators that are enlisted in carrying forward the expert knowledge that the Council wants to promote.

Q: There is more and more scientific literature about how a child's brain architecture is affected by the experiences and interactions they have early on in life. How do you see that kind of research being relevant to state legislators?

A: It's important to the fact that state legislators, all of us, should understand that early childhood development sets the tone for a lifetime. And if we can provide children with the positive influence of that they will reap the benefits of a lifetime and so will society.

Republican representative

Importantly, the incorporation of cause and effect statements can help scientists make critical links to outcomes beyond the individual child and family. Causal sequences that demonstrate connections between interventions and such outcomes as community stability, economic prosperity, etc. can help make these issues more meaningful as public issues, not merely private issues. The technique of using causal sequences (see http://frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/framebytes/FrameByte_causalchains.pdf for more information) should be regularly employed.

c) Longitudinal Data

In some domains, such as Health and Education, there is a large body of longitudinal data that legislators are comfortable dealing with because it fits clear and familiar categories. In these areas, there is a “track” through time where widely-spaced causes and effects can be measured and turned into compelling policy arguments. We know that investing in pediatric health improves health outcomes down the line, for instance, and that good “pre-school” programs lead to better school outcomes.

Other kinds of longitudinal data, namely those that “cross” domains are more difficult to convey without the larger Development Frame, discussed above.

There is no short-term horizon connecting [investment in childhood programs] to economic development. But in the long term one would argue that it should have a positive impact on economic development. So I understand that argument but it's a long-term argument. And here's the problem fundamentally that a lot of us have.

Republican representative

The idea that ECD programs can affect all sorts of other domains may seem plausible, but it does not yet seem particularly relevant to policy debates about such things as law enforcement policies or economic development.

This represents another of the potential benefits that would arise if the Council succeeded in establishing the Development frame among legislators – various kinds of longitudinal data would become part of a solid, coherent story, and become “easier to think.”

d) Uncontroversial, Consensus-based Data

Legislators are sensitive to the fact that scientific data can be manipulated for rhetorical purposes, and also that there are many points where scientists do not agree. While it is important to present new knowledge as new and interesting, data must also be as free from doubt and controversy as possible in order to be successfully taken up. In practical terms, this means that findings presented to legislators must be drawn from areas where consensus has already been reached. For instance, the detailed mechanisms by which brains physically construct themselves throughout childhood is still an area full of unknowns, but the general consensus that they do so in interaction with the environment is not controversial at all.

This assurance can help politicians treat scientific information as factual and as a solid basis for action. Note that this finding also surfaced in FrameWorks focus groups conducted in Arizona with legislators. As researcher Public Knowledge suggested, the Council is made even more credible when people are exposed to its process of carefully vetting research with input from a diverse group of scientists.

e) Local data

Legislators in Ohio and elsewhere show a strong preference for local knowledge. One handy method for evading data that challenge common assumptions in some way is to say that, while that may be true in New York or Illinois, we here in Ohio are a different case. Where it is not possible to see local data (which, often enough, simply does not exist), legislators at least prefer that the knowledge come from familiar, local sources.

The effort to create relationships with local organizations or individual experts who can serve as go-between or conduits for Council information is a critical way of turning general expert knowledge into “local knowledge.” Again, this finding echoes recommendations emerging from the Arizona focus groups, including the need for local scientists and/or pediatricians to be exposed to the Council’s work and trained in the framing techniques necessary to communicate it.

f) Timely data

The pieces of information that will be taken in at any given moment are often defined by the nature of the current legislative debate. When the Ohio interviews were undertaken, for example, the effectiveness of Head Start programs had come under attack as part of an effort by conservatives to justify scaling back the program in order to save money. The

two kinds of data most specifically sought by legislators in this context included, (a) longitudinal data showing clear, beneficial outcomes from Head Start, and (b) calculations to show that cutting back on Head Start would not save money over the long haul. This is further evidence that it is best to continue communicating with legislators, to forge better connections to local individuals and organizations (who are more likely to understand the debates of the moment), and to more formally integrate science into the legislative process.

I said [to Childhood Services], ‘What’s the cost of sending a kid through that system? You know, so that I can take that back and share that with some of my colleagues and say, look we could have prevented that by putting them some place safe for a fraction of what it now costs.’ And they said, ‘well we don’t know and we’ll get back to you on that,’ and they never did.

Democratic representative

This finding also argues for local experts who have scientific training and are capable and willing to translate the Council’s work into relevant and timely information, attentive to the particular political context.

4. The “Excusably Deficient Parent” Frame

Previous FrameWorks research has shown that there is a “Deficient Parent” Frame that is widespread in Americans’ thinking. Generally speaking, this is the idea that many parents do a poor and irresponsible job of raising their children. This frame, especially in its stronger version, is unhelpful for at least three reasons:

- It excludes awareness of contextual/systemic causes for the problems of children and families.
- It does not suggest a role for the broader community (except in cases where the parent is pathologically deficient).
- It focuses attention on whether struggling parents really “deserve” our help (or, instead, deserve what they get).

Interviews with sympathetic lawmakers elicited a very common progressive version of the “Deficient Parent” framing – call it the Excusably Deficient Parent Frame – that seems preferable with respect to the first two problems above: It entails awareness of sociological and historical contexts that offer explanations for “failing” parents (e.g. there are understandable economic or cultural reasons why some parents are inattentive, poor role models, or poor providers). And, for at least some legislators, it suggests collective solutions.

In today’s society, if a child is lucky to have two parents they may be in a situation where both of those parents are working, maybe working more than one

job, and it's tougher and tougher to make ends meet and so they're falling behind in what they can provide to their own children. So it becomes society's problem.

Democratic representative

However, the Excusably Deficient Parent Frame does little to deal with the third problem: The focus still centers on failing parents, only some of whom can “deserve” our help. This model establishes only a blurry line between personal failure (deficient parents) and personal failure with excuses (well-meaning, but deficient parents). This is not sufficiently solid ground to take on the powerful cognitive models that order understandings of parenting.

I don't think any parent wants to see their kid incarcerated. It's just a fact that our society is sometimes so twisted. We have too many single parents, we have too many families earning far less today than they did ten years ago that are forced to work two and three jobs – sometimes both the mother and father, if that family is lucky enough to have a mother, what with divorce running the way it is and with just single parents being what they are.

Democratic representative

The idea that there are deficient parents who don't deserve help is a powerful argument for those who would prefer to do nothing.

I believe the family is the structure of our society, and they are responsible. If you open up the door and you start doing some of these things as a government entity, are you allowing parents or grandparents or family members to skirt their responsibilities? And then where does it end? Now it might just be a little bit and all of a sudden, ten years from now, government is doing everything and then it just costs more money.

Republican representative

Problematically, this frame focuses all attention on the parent, not the child. In so doing, it elevates one value – Worthiness – to the forefront of the debate. Furthermore, a logical response to deficient parenting – especially since these parents are guilty of harming the innocent – is to take punitive action.

But when they don't take care of themselves, or they are fighting, how do you deal with those issues? I don't think we can legislate that as much, but we can make it where they suffer the consequences.

Republican representative

This pattern is a reminder of the importance of continuing to work towards communications that effectively convey the *inevitable and important* role of the broader community in determining a child's outcomes.

5. Term limits as a potential opportunity for outside messengers

One interesting difference among legislatures, which has a bearing on communications, is that some legislators operate within term-limit systems (as in Ohio, Maine and Arizona). Because legislators tend to rely on trusted colleagues (whom they consider to be expert) in order to evaluate arguments about something like ECD policy, the higher turnover and lack of senior figures in some of these legislatures creates a special context. The loss of collegial expertise means that in some cases legislators rely more upon outsiders – lobbyists, practitioners, and experts with some sort of institutional presence.

Q: Do you look to any of your colleagues for specific information or information in general on these types of issues?

A: It has changed a lot since term limits . . . I do count on people within agencies that I can build up a trust factor with. I have to count on people who have been around that are advocates. Interestingly enough, I had one of my colleagues come to me and say, "You're the person that I look to who understands these—these children's issues." And I'm thinking, oh my God, I've only been here two years!

State senator

Of the 99 state Reps in 2000, 44 were incoming freshmen, so there was the need for the special interests to get in before us. We met with so many people that first year. It was like you hit the reset button. Start over, and all existing relationships that you had prior to term limits were gone.

Republican representative

On the other hand, the lack of expertise among colleagues can mean that some legislators will rely even more heavily than legislators elsewhere on their own layperson's knowledge.

I'm trying to think of how many of them are still here with term limits and people jumping ship. I can't think of too many people on [these] issues on that I have a tremendous amount of confidence in . . . My mother is a retired teacher and most of my siblings and parents were teachers so it's something sort of near and dear to my heart.

Democratic representative

In effect, this seems to offer both an opportunity and a challenge for advocates' efforts to introduce their findings into legislative thinking – and ultimately to have the findings be used to create policies.

Conclusion

The conversations with Ohio legislators provided another opportunity for “reality checks” regarding effective communication with state legislators. As in New England and Arizona, state legislators are constrained by various forces in their environment that make careful attention to the form of communications materials imperative. Unless these materials strike the right tone, and are organized around concrete, repeatable explanatory points, their chances of having impacts within and beyond the legislative context is minimal.

Furthermore, the conversations confirmed another, even more important challenge for the Council, which entails helping to establish entirely new frames of reference among state legislators, who have a disproportionate power to act on these new frames. Until a Development Frame that transcends the domains of health and education is established at both cognitive and institutional levels, it is unlikely that the kinds of policy changes sought by the Council can have a real chance to succeed.

Bringing about meaningful change depends largely on the Council's success at establishing (at both cognitive and institutional levels) a Development Frame that transcends health and education; a quantifiable and global measure of developmental success that can compete with grades, salaries, IQ and so forth; and a frame along the lines of Citizen or Community Development that organizes various “soft” effects known to result from effective early childhood intervention.

APPENDIX: Methodology

The questions developed by Cultural Logic for this research (see next Appendix) were deliberately broad and open-ended, designed not to elicit opinions on particular policies, but rather to give legislators as much latitude as possible in responding. This method of questioning allows analysts to observe patterns such as:

- the associations legislators spontaneously make
- familiar arguments they instinctively reach for
- default framings of a topic (e.g. in terms of Personal/Family Responsibility, Wise Investment, etc.),
- the degree to which legislators seem to be thinking about the issues “on the fly,” as opposed to responding in familiar sound bites,
- the degree to which they respond in terms of data vs. cause-and-effect statements, vs. values, and so forth.

The questions also explored certain issues known from previous research to be relevant to communication with legislators, including attitudes towards science/scientists, and the nature of information-sharing among colleagues.

Cognitive analysis

The analysis presented in the report is based not only on responses to the questions developed by Cultural Logic, but on patterns in the conversations as a whole. The analytical approach – based on principles of cognitive anthropology and linguistics – yields insights not available from standard interview, polling, or focus group techniques. It does not look for statements of opinion, but for patterns of thought that may even be unconscious. It does not look for thinking about current topics, but for more established and long-standing, default reasoning patterns. Some of the clues to these important patterns come from topics that are *omitted*, moments of *inconsistency* where one understanding clashes with another, and the *metaphors* people use to talk about a subject. Furthermore, the method is designed to explore the differences between *rhetorical mode* – in which people define themselves in opposition to other groups and perspectives, and repeat ideas and phrases familiar from public discourse – and *reasonable mode* – in which they reflect their own experiences, think for themselves, and are more open to new information. Put briefly, this analysis focuses on *how* people think rather than *what* they think.

Importantly, this kind of cognitive research works on the premise that unconscious, default understandings of the world (cognitive and cultural *models*) can guide people’s understanding of an issue in ways they do not even recognize. One of the most important aspects of these default models is that they often lead people to understandings that they might reject at other moments of more careful reflection. People who *know better on some level* still are easily derailed from productive thinking by common, default patterns. These hidden, underlying understandings can be very difficult to challenge and displace, and, if they are not accounted for, they can derail communications.

APPENDIX: Interview questions requested by FrameWorks/Cultural Logic

The following questions were inserted as the second through eighth questions in a longer interview protocol administered by the Community Solutions Project with state legislators in Ohio. Recruitment was also controlled by this group. Transcripts and analysis were then conducted by Cultural Logic on the basis of these recorded interviews.

- What is the role of the legislature in ensuring positive early childhood outcomes in the state?
- Who do you look to among your colleagues for information about these issues?
- Can you remember any information on this topic that people [whether colleagues or outside experts or advocates] have talked about in the legislature in the past few years?
- How do you feel about the idea that early childhood is the family's business and the legislature ought to stay out of it?
- There is more and more scientific research about how the development of a child's brain architecture is affected by the kinds of experiences and interactions they have very early in life. How do you see that kind of research being relevant to state legislators?
- How important are scientists as a voice on this issue? Why?
- What connections do you see between early childhood development and economic issues in the state?

About FrameWorks Institute: The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1999 to advance science-based communications research and practice. The Institute conducts original, multi-method research to identify the communications strategies that will advance public understanding of social problems and improve public support for remedial policies. The Institute's work also includes teaching the nonprofit sector how to apply these science-based communications strategies in their work for social change. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations, as well as toolkits and other products for the nonprofit sector at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

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