



**Telling New Stories in Mississippi
to Inspire Engagement and Change:
A FrameWorks MessageMemo**

Prepared for the FrameWorks Institute
by
Diane Benjamin, Susan Nall Bales and Tiffany Manuel

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Preface

In the context of enormous political, social and economic challenges, local leaders and advocates in Mississippi are working towards the goals of improving the educational system, family economic stability and race relations. Even so, they struggle to advance a unified public discourse about these topics that would inspire and support broader social change over time. In so doing, they face the dominant and highly entrenched ways that these issues are framed in the public discussion. If they are to succeed, they will need to advance a new story about Mississippi's future — what contributes to it, what impedes it and what ordinary citizens need to know to distinguish between substantive and symbolic reforms? While this is far from easy, it is helped by access to a significant body of communications research that identifies not only what community organizers and advocates are up against as they weigh into Mississippi discourse, but also what narrative tools can inform and reshape public thinking toward greater participation and better outcomes.

This MessageMemo discusses and applies FrameWorks' body of research findings for two key issues in Mississippi: education and early child development. Because it is such an important subtext of these issues, this memo also discusses how race enters into the public conversation about both education and early child development. Understanding and using this research will help Mississippi social change leaders harness the power of effective communications to change the public discourse, creating greater public engagement on behalf of children, their families and communities.

The FrameWorks Institute employs a multi-method, iterative approach to communications known as Strategic Frame Analysis™. This approach recognizes that public understanding and acceptance of an issue happens against a backdrop of long-term media coverage, perceptions formed over time, historical realities and parables, and scripts we have learned since childhood to help us make sense of our world. Strategic Frame Analysis™ draws on methods from the cognitive and social sciences, including anthropology, linguistics, cognitive psychology, sociology, political science and communications theory¹ to document and address these perceptual challenges for communicators.

Since 2001, FrameWorks has studied how Americans think about a wide variety of important social issues, including education, early child development and race. In 2008, FrameWorks began a multi-year investigation to document patterns in public thinking about all levels of the American education system, and to explore the challenges and opportunities that confront those who would reshape the public conversation to support comprehensive reform. Our decades-long early child development research explores how communications about early child development influences public attitudes and policy preferences. Beginning in 2003, FrameWorks has pursued an intensive research and applications project devoted to understanding how Americans think and talk about the issue of race.

FrameWorks is also no stranger to Mississippi. With funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, FrameWorks conducted qualitative research in the Mississippi Delta in 2007. The purpose of this work was to understand “how residents of the Mississippi Delta think about their communities, the challenges they face in realizing the full potential of those communities for positive social change, and the roles that individuals and institutions can play in stewarding positive change.”ⁱⁱ Thus, this MessageMemo draws from both our topical research (on education, early child development and race) and on our place-based research in the Mississippi Delta. Although all of the research that undergirds our communications recommendations in each of these areas can be found on our website, this MessageMemo synthesizes the findings from this body of research and situates those findings within a Mississippi context.

It is important to note that FrameWorks’ research in Mississippi is ongoing. This MessageMemo takes advantage of a comprehensive content analysis of Mississippi media to further root national research in local context.ⁱⁱⁱ Findings from additional ethnographic research and peer discourse sessions will add to this evolving body of work, yielding insights that will be incorporated into a future MessageMemo. This is, then, a work in progress.

This MessageMemo is organized as follows:

- We first present a synthesis of the Cognitive Terrain that characterizes the patterns of thinking among ordinary Americans across the topical areas (education, early child development and race) and underscore these issues with our initial qualitative findings from the Mississippi Delta;
- We then break down some of the key communications challenges that we found in each topical area and discuss how the media reinforces harmful patterns of thinking; and
- We conclude by offering framing recommendations to guide advocates in redirecting public conversations on these issues to open up new possibilities for social change.

Mapping the Cognitive Terrain: Education, Early Child Development and Race

A key goal of framing issues more effectively is to actively engage citizens in developing and promoting solutions to social problems. One barrier to that engagement is the difficulty that people have thinking clearly and effectively about these problems. As political scientists Aaron Wildavsky and Nelson Polsby have noted, “Most [voters] are not interested in most public issues most of the time.”^{iv} As a result, people use mental shortcuts to make sense of their social and political worlds. These mental shortcuts rely on Cultural Models, a shared set of understandings and assumptions about how the world works. People derive these Cultural Models from shared experiences as well as public discourse.

The Cultural Models below trigger ways of thinking about social problems, including education, early child development and race, that contribute to a lack of public will to create and implement collective, public solutions to these long-standing challenges. FrameWorks’ research shows that these models are “top of mind” and can be easily activated by the cues embedded in everyday narratives. For this reason, it is imperative that communicators understand the tripwires that set off an unproductive exchange as well as effective ways to evoke better models in mind. They can best do this by assessing the “shape” of public thinking. To that end, we offer the following observations across our research with reference to those attitudes and beliefs most likely to affect public thinking about education and early child development in Mississippi.

1. **Belief in the primacy of individual achievement and self-makingness.** Americans are eager to ascribe success or failure to the actions of individuals and, in the case of children, to their parents. For example, educational achievement is attributed largely to the efforts of individual students’ hard work and discipline. The contribution of the education system (funding, curriculum, governance, etc.) is discounted. In young children, development is assumed to be “automatic” and occurring entirely within the child, rather than as a product of relationships and environments. Problems experienced by children are assumed to be the fault of “bad parents.” White Americans attribute poorer outcomes for minority group members to a lack of positive character and effort, rather than a lack of access to opportunity. Common communications strategies such as telling stories of successful individuals who have “beaten the odds” further reinforce this individualistic paradigm.
2. **Inability to think about the systems and structures that contribute to both problems and possible solutions.** Related to the point above, Americans have difficulty conceptualizing the systems and structures that undergird our society. When they think about education, for example, they conceptualize a classroom and think about the simple triad of teacher, parent and student, while the education system itself remains largely invisible. When they think about early child development, they imagine a child and his or her parents, but do not include the physical, social and political environments that surround them and shape

outcomes. When they think about racism, most Americans understand it as hurtful acts between individuals or groups, while the processes by which racism is perpetuated through structures and institutions is hidden. This poses a significant barrier to social change efforts, since many of the solutions to persistent and long-standing social problems lie within policies, systems and structures, rather than in changing individual behavior. This is reinforced in the public discussion; the Mississippi media content analysis, for example, found little evidence “that education, jobs and the state’s economy are intertwined, each having a bearing on the other, with education being the crucial building block from which all else stems ... [this] was not a consistent theme in the articles examined.”^v Without this “big picture” view, Mississippians easily default to assessments in which not only the causes of problems, but also their consequences, are narrowly individual. That is, if a child is not appropriately educated, the only ones affected are the child and the immediate family, not the broader community.

3. **Belief in historical progress (or, in Mississippi, the perceived lack thereof).** White Americans in general have a deep belief in historical progress regarding race relations. They believe that the unfortunate actions of the past have now been corrected, and any ongoing problems that remain are due to a dwindling number of racist individuals. In Mississippi, this belief is complicated by the equally available flip side of the narrative, i.e., things never improve in Mississippi and never will. FrameWorks’ 2007 research in the Delta concluded, “The reaction of residents to their perceptions of how life in the Delta ‘works’ is a sense of stasis, regret and resignation. ... They are scarred by history and their personal experiences of it. They would like to be more efficacious in making the Delta a better place to live for all. But they feel downtrodden and are looking to be ‘lifted up,’ a term that arises out of their strong sense of faith and enduring belief in redemption or, put in the vernacular, in second chances. They sometimes expressed a sense of resignation, in light of the long-term and deeply rooted problems they perceive to afflict the Delta.”^{vi} A parallel script in Mississippi media coverage likely serves to reinforce the idea that “Mississippi is always dead last.”^{vii} This lack of empowerment adds to the reframing challenge in the region.
4. **Widespread agreement that things are in crisis, but a limited sense of the possibility of solutions.** The public is quite willing to believe that things are in a dire state. In particular, FrameWorks’ education research revealed a deep belief that the education system is broken beyond repair. The media script on education observed in recent FrameWorks research drove home the point that “public schools in Mississippi rank poorly compared to their counterparts in other states. The dropout rate remains high and many who do graduate are recipients of subpar educations. Rarely were the prospects of the situation said to be promising, this because the state is facing a budget crisis, which was said to only worsen the situation.”^{viii} Issue advocates, in an attempt to raise the public profile of their issue and to motivate action, often reinforce this crisis frame. However, the likely reaction to this approach is that people begin to see social problems as intractable,

overwhelming and beyond change. They doubt the ability of any actor, whether government, schools, the nonprofit sector or business, to make significant change.

5. **Unfamiliarity with explanatory mechanisms for how systems and structures work.** Americans often lack concrete understanding of the mechanisms that underlie social issues. There is a gap between the highly developed understanding that experts have of an issue and the shallowness of the public’s conceptual reach. Americans do not understand, for example, how the education system functions to support or hinder student success. They do not understand how children’s brains develop and what they need to develop well. They do not understand how access to housing, education and employment opportunities affects the well-being of one racial group as opposed to another, or how disenfranchised communities negatively impact the long-term health and well-being of their residents. Advocates often assume that the public shares their nuanced understanding of an issue, and neglect to craft the messages necessary to improve that understanding.

The following passage from *The State of the South 2007* is an example of this problem because it is likely to seem like an unprecedented “new story” unless it is accompanied by translational frame elements that make it easier to think (and swallow). Further hampered by its narrative construction as a series of lists, the passage will be consumed by more chronically available Cultural Models of how the world works, such as individual-level choices: “The swift transformation of its economic and social landscapes has left the region with ‘equity gaps’ that threaten its future vitality — in educational attainment, in prospects for a healthy life, in the availability of jobs, and in economic wherewithal. Assuring educational attainment beyond high school, promoting healthy lifestyles, addressing poverty and its side effects, and removing barriers to opportunity will make Southern communities more competitive in the economy of today and the foreseeable future.”^{ix}

In the following sections, we amplify these overall challenges by identifying nuances particular to education and early child development.

Patterns of Public Thinking about Education and Education Reform

There are many cognitive routes people might take in attempting to reason about education and education reform. However, with predictable regularity, the same small group of patterns of thinking were observed in both individual and group discourse. We summarize below those we consider to be the most important for communicators in Mississippi as they attempt to redirect the conversation about education reform.^x

1. **Little Picture Thinking: Education systems are invisible, which makes reforms unimaginable.** While experts see a system at multiple levels — from pre-K to higher education — with numerous potential sites for learning, the public’s view is much narrower. Through this lens, people struggle to see an education system at all. Instead, they focus on individual classrooms and on the

achievement of individual students. They also focus immediately and exclusively on the K-12 years, even when prompted to discuss pre-K or higher education. Moreover, they have difficulty thinking about relationships between parts of the system and how they might be redesigned. This way of thinking makes it difficult for the public to think about how statewide education reform in Mississippi might improve local schools, or even where such reform might begin.

2. **Crisis thinking leads to caution and conservatism, not innovation and transformation.** Americans find it easy to agree on education's utter and dismal failure. When this line of thinking is pursued, people actually become more cautious than they appear to be on the surface. While they often talk about and agree that we should dramatically change the education system, what they really have in mind are minor changes that constitute relatively conservative reforms. Even as they admit that the education system is broken, they are afraid that education reform might put their own or their children's educational resources and access in jeopardy. This fear constrains broader policy thinking and the willingness to imagine what a dramatically reformed system would look like. Participants in our Delta research understood that schools needed fixing, but had difficulty identifying solutions beyond individuals leaving the state in order to gain education and find employment.

3. **The Tangible Triad: Unframed conversations about education default to three highly visible actors who are held responsible for results — parents, teachers and students.** Education was consistently described by FrameWorks' informants as "happening" among a triad of parents, teachers and students. It is in describing these interactions that people can vividly explain how education works. While it is indisputable that parents, teachers and students play important roles in educational outcomes, the intensity and exclusivity of this triad crowds out the ability to consider the equally important roles that school boards, taxpayers, superintendents, principals and other policymakers play. Thus, if there are problems that require reform in Mississippi, people will focus on issues of motivation, character, discipline or effort attached to parents, teachers and students.

Closely related is the idea that student success and teacher effectiveness are due to a single quality: caring. Similarly, a good parent requires little more than caring to motivate the student. This narrow understanding of education ignores the role that family and community resources or the quality of the learning environment might play in student success. Education reform proposals in Mississippi that focus on the reallocation of resources, curriculum development, disparities in teacher preparation, school restructuring, etc. are likely to be challenged by this narrow focus on parents, (caring) teachers and students.

4. **The kinds of reforms that are easiest to think are the most conventional: money, "the basics" and computers.** Most people assume that any reforms to the current educational system would require that much more money be invested

in existing programs. There is little understanding of reforms that are cost-neutral but might realign parts of the system, or reforms that might save money overall. Education reform is assumed to be expensive and, in the current economic environment, beyond reach. Thus, when education reformers talk about large and ambitious reforms, they are frequently viewed as idealistic and impractical. This thinking will crowd out reforms in Mississippi that don't fall into these three conventional categories. Moreover, Mississippi's dystopian self-identity ("dead last") surely plays into public skepticism about real reform.

5. **Higher education is not for everyone.** While K-12 education is readily accepted as a foundation for individual success in life and is also accorded a public role in that it is perceived as a foundation of societal success, this is not true of higher education. Higher education is seen as a precious commodity to be secured only by those who can afford it and is largely stripped of its contribution to the common good. Note that African American respondents to FrameWorks' survey were only able to support the assertion that most people in the society needed higher education when they were reminded that this was in the society's best interest. Without this reminder, one can assume that they weighed the likelihood of minority kids' securing access to this resource and decided it was unlikely and perhaps unnecessary to their individual success. However, when reminded that the country as a whole needed to prepare for a different world where different skills were needed, they assigned significantly more support to policies that would increase access to higher education for all.

In Mississippi, this finding is especially critical because it underscores the importance of avoiding the individual achievement narrative which proved dominant in FrameWorks' Delta research: "He went through the struggles from depression to growing to become smarter and using all that to bring everyone together so he could have the finer things like money, a big house, and happiness."^{xi}

6. **Early education is fancy babysitting.** Preschool is seen by most Americans as being for social and entertainment purposes *only* and has little "real" educational value. In this way, it fits precariously in a discussion about education. Development of social skills, preschool's main contribution to student development, is seen to develop naturally, even inevitably, and to unfold regardless of whether the child attends preschool or not. This has implications for how people view the necessity of preschool programs and attendance. While people readily agree that kids have different starting points when they enter school, kids who fail are perceived to do so in large part because they came into school at a low level of performance. The starting point is almost entirely determined by the home environment, which is shaped and constructed exclusively by parents. This is a variation of the common "foundational" metaphor for child development in American culture (that kids all need good foundations on which to build and develop into adults). But according to the starting point idea, the foundation is not supplied by education but by the parents

who prepare their kids to enter the education system. This is all the more reason that reframing early education needs to be done with recourse to developmental metaphors that explain the underlying process within an ecological framework and not within the narrow contours of people's approaches to education.

In Mississippi, where issues of effort and motivation are racially constructed, the idea that black parents may be "using" pre-K programs to offload the responsibility for parenting is likely to be top-of-mind. Moreover, wherever folk models of child-rearing remain strong, these communities are likely to adhere to models of self-makingness in which "soft" social skills are dismissed in favor of "hard" skills like discipline and willpower. The early years, then, become about incorporating parental values, for good or ill, and overcoming any deficiencies through innate characteristics and the struggle for self-mastery. This view, of course, flies in the face of the last decade of neuroscience and child development research.

Race and Education Reform

It is almost impossible to envision a public discussion of education in the United States that doesn't mention the disparities between students of different races and/or socio-economic classes. Additionally, FrameWorks' Mississippi Delta research found that uncorrected racial injustices are widely perceived as a key factor holding the Delta back.

Understanding the public's dominant Cultural Models about race is essential before considering the confluence of race and education reform in Mississippi. To review here,^{xii} American Cultural Models about race are:

- **the Myth of Historical Progress and Personal Racism** (we have made sufficient progress on civil rights and any residual racism is personal and located between individuals);
- **the Self-Making Person** (an individual's success or failure is entirely the result of their own effort); and
- **Separate Fates** (blacks and whites live separate lives, have separate characters and each group's well-being is disconnected from the other's).

Each of these ways of thinking about race in America impacts the discussion about education reform, especially what is commonly and problematically referred to as the "achievement gap."

FrameWorks' cognitive media analysis of the coverage of education issues and race found that "Two frames were dominant in these articles [about education and race]. First was the idea that education was a competitive race between racial groups in which there are winners and losers. The second is that racial disparities in education are defined by the 'achievement gap,' a notion that highlights individual performance rather than

systemic inequities. These frames shaped the media’s construction of the problem of race in education, organized the types of explanatory frames employed, and finally limited the kinds of solutions that could be imagined.”^{xiii}

Racism *was* cited in some articles reviewed for this analysis as a reason why disparities in education persist. However, reflecting the “Historical Progress and Personal Racism” Cultural Model, racism was defined as individual and overt acts of discrimination, rather than as a force residing in institutions, systems and structures. To the extent that educational inequities are viewed as a problem solved long ago and existing disparities are attributed to individual acts of racism, the need for comprehensive reform to address problems of achievement is obscured. Additionally, the Cultural Models of “Self-Making Person” and “Separate Fates” frame school success as the result of poor personal choices, low expectations and the collective failure of blacks as a group to value education appropriately. In this mindset, low-income minority communities only need to “get their act together” to ameliorate racial inequalities in schools.

Patterns of Public Thinking about Early Child Development

There is also a fixed, cognitive landscape that Americans, including Mississippians, navigate as they think about the development of young children. Here are a few of its most important features:

1. **Child Development is a Black Box.** Americans have only a loosely organized model of early child development, leaving them to view what happens inside the child as a “black box.” They struggle with how to explain child development. Because of this, many conversations about early child development default to those aspects of child-rearing with which they are most familiar: it’s only about the family; self-reliance is the main goal of the successful, self-made child; and physical safety is the primary concern. People know that something important happens in the development of very young children, but they are unclear on what it might be, what would support that development and what factors might lead to difficulties. This “cognitive hole” will make it difficult for Mississippians to make informed decisions about where to invest limited resources to achieve the best impact on children’s development.
2. **Most popular default frames and models downplay the full range of a child’s critical interactions, concentrating attention solely on the family.** One of the primary default frames in public reasoning is that parents are solely responsible for children’s development (sometimes termed the “Family Bubble”). Indeed, interdependence and interactivity outside the family are downplayed in favor of children’s individualism, self-reliance and parental responsibility. The success or failure of a child is entirely attributed to the actions of the parents. This thinking minimizes the important challenges for children in Mississippi that happen outside of the family, such as the influence of children’s physical environments, their networks of community supports and relationships, and the strength or weakness of supporting institutions.

These dual challenges — establishing a societal interest in children beyond the responsibility accorded to families and opening up the Black Box to reveal an interactive process in which the brain interacts with environments to produce outcomes — require careful reframing of the public narrative with special attention to the way it is further encumbered in Mississippi by issues of race and class.

Race and Early Childhood Development

FrameWorks’ review of media coverage nationwide found that discussions of race within coverage of early child development received less media attention than education, health or employment.^{xiv} Subsequent examination of Mississippi media concluded similarly: “Disparities based on race went unnamed in the coverage examined.”^{xv} However, to the extent it was present, the discussion suffered from the same problematic framing as education. Irrespective of the racial background of children, national news articles discussed early child development primarily in terms of mental and intellectual development, with development portrayed as a competitive event. Thus, the “achievement gap” metaphor between white and minority children reappeared in the early child education context, with the same problematic implications as for K-12 education.

Another troubling finding was that articles that explicitly focused on racial disparities in child development tended to concentrate on higher rates of neglect and abuse among black children. This plays directly into Cultural Models about both race and early child development that narrowly attribute problems in children solely to defects of character and parenting. The role of environments and the structural inequalities built into institutions is absent from media coverage, both nationally and in Mississippi media.

Discussions of race and early child development in the media also are nested inside of discussions of class and poverty. This is problematic because these discussions stay within the “Family Bubble.” For example, in a discussion of two articles about lower-class children growing up in deprived environments, FrameWorks’ media analysis concludes, “While the take-away message in both articles was that children thrive in stimulating *environments*, environments are defined exclusively by their interactions with their parents. Neither comment on the children’s exposure to other adults, such as extended families or caregivers who interact with the children. Nor do the articles comment upon the conditioning effect of other community influences on those parents’ ability to parent — such as the presence or absence of social networks, for example, in addressing maternal depression.”^{xvi}

Poverty and Early Child Development

FrameWorks’ review of Mississippi news coverage found the most prevalent disparities cited “were those based on income and poverty, since limited family income was reported to hinder access to early childhood education and skills development, both outside of and within the home. In turn, lack of skills was said to limit one’s employment opportunities,

which, because this is such a pervasive problem, results in Mississippi's lower per capita income."^{xvii} In this section, we discuss data gathered over the past two years on the ways that exposure to explanatory information about child development influences support for policies designed to remediate child and family poverty. Along with race, Mississippians in FrameWorks' 2007 Delta research identified class and power as the key, unresolved issues that prevent Mississippi from moving forward. However, problems associated with economic dislocation and the lack of available jobs were often described in terms of natural forces without any causal connection.^{xviii}

Based on the widespread use of a "vulnerable child" appeal in advocates' materials, FrameWorks tested the effect of this approach on public support for a range of child development policies through the following paragraph: "*Some people believe that society needs to invest in programs that help the most vulnerable children whose families struggle to make ends meet. According to this view, one way to level the playing field for children who suffer from poverty and discrimination is to financially support their access to the same high quality early childhood programs that wealthier families can afford.*" The research resulted in the following set of recommendations.^{xix}

1. **Talking about poor children and the struggles of families in poverty does not elevate public support for policies that improve child and family well-being.** Exposure to the test paragraph above had **no** positive effect on support for any child development policies, including those targeted explicitly at poor children and their families. When "poor" is used as an adjective (e.g., "poor" children), poverty becomes a characteristic of the individual, something that people believe is very difficult to change through community efforts or improved public policies. Because differences in outcomes for children are often attributed to either good or bad parenting, the public believes that fixing disparities requires changes in parents' motivation and behavior, rather than improving the economic conditions in their communities. The Cultural Model that children develop automatically further reinforces this tendency, leaving little role for external environments.
2. **These assumptions hide other critical factors for development that are intertwined with poverty,** including the influence of a child's physical environment, the network of community relationships, and their social and emotional growth.
3. **The public tends to think of the concept of "development" as learning, or the accumulation of the "asset" of knowledge.** When development is seen as acquiring a set of skills, age-appropriate processes are discounted in favor of what might be viewed as a consumerist model. In this way of thinking, children can always "catch up" through individual effort by acquiring the basic skills they lacked. They are less likely to see that early relationships and experiences will affect both later learning (the acquisition of skills, ability to concentrate and adapt, etc.) and health (from cardiovascular health to stress susceptibility) for the rest of the child's life. While the public is generally aware of some of these social consequences of poverty, they are not likely to see the long-term consequences of

impaired early child development as having broad societal impacts. This “bootstrap” approach runs directly counter to the science of early child development which puts forward a scaffolding process in which “skill begets skill.”

Commonalities Across Issues

This analysis of how Mississippians are likely to approach the related issues of education, early child development and race offers some important commonalities across the issue areas. In effect, these patterns of thinking are highly salient and serve as “double or triple whammys” because they allow people to use a single functional model to make sense of disparate topics. In effect, these create the underlying traps in public thinking that require the greatest effort by communicators to avoid:

- **Self-Makingness**, or the idea that individual fate is the result of the choices, habits and willpower of individuals who are largely unshaped by conditions, structures and societal constraints.
- **Little Picture Thinking**, or a narrow perspective on social issues that reduces them to a handful of actors whose impact can only be understood with respect to personal qualities and are disconnected from societal influences.
- **Limited Consequences**, or the assumption that whatever happens to individuals and groups is largely confined to those individuals and groups; there is no shared fate that is affected by these outcomes, whether positive or negative.
- **Lack of Mechanisms**, or the inability to perceive how social issues work such that “man-made” explanations of causation and solution can be considered. This leads to a sense that no practical solutions are available to address societal problems through policies and programs, and the only progress that can be made is through limited, individual actions aimed at protecting oneself from dysfunctional systems.

It is these commonalities that are addressed in the following sections of this Message Memo through the use of frame elements and narrative devices drawn from our reframing research.

Redirections

Telling a new story against this backdrop of powerful and familiar ways of looking at the world requires a song sheet and a lot of practice. But advocates around the country have done just that on issues as complex as climate change, budgets and taxes, and children's issues, by learning how to rethink and retell the story of their work.

In this section, we provide specific recommendations for redirecting public thinking toward more productive conversations about early child development, education and race. These reframing strategies are drawn directly from the situation analysis above and are designed to counter or redirect public thinking. Finally, these recommendations emerge from FrameWorks' iterative method of both qualitative and quantitative research. As such, they draw upon an approach that is attentive to various frame elements and their respective power in overcoming unproductive patterns of thinking. These include: (1) Values that orient public thinking to what's at stake; and (2) explanatory metaphors called Simplifying Models that concretize and simplify the fundamental mechanisms that underlie a particular process or issue.

Retelling the story of Mississippi community change also involves a self-editing process in which communicators shed the old stories they have incorporated into their thinking because they now understand the harm they can do to their long-term goals. Here we identify those challenges:

Framing in the Magnolia State

Do's:

- Establish an end-goal that is larger than any specific community or group, that makes clear the interdependence among groups and the shared fate of all Mississippians.
- Contextualize individual success by focusing on the shared relationships and environments that made that success possible.
- Use simplifying models to make systems and structures more visible.
- Use simplifying models to explain the concrete mechanism of how systems work.
- Offer practical, reasonable solutions, and explain them within the structure of values and metaphors you have established.

Don'ts:

- Don't use stories that highlight individual achievement and "self-makingness."

- Don't focus on individual-level aspects of problems ("bad" parents, classroom teachers, isolated acts of racism).
- Don't reinforce a message of crisis or hopelessness.

The New Mississippi Story

- **Begins by establishing *what is at stake for the state and for all Mississippians in education and early child development.*** This is the role that a Value must play in reorienting thinking to shared fate, to collective responsibility and to a practical vision of what could be accomplished through sound public policy. The good news is that our frame effects research suggests that values perform better among Mississippians than they do in other parts of the country and we've identified several specific values that appear to shift public discourse in more productive directions. Use the Values of *Future Preparation*, *Opportunity for All*, and *Lifting Up/Redemption* (see examples below).
- **Uses metaphors to help people see *how the education system and/or early child development "work,"*** not just in a naturalistic way, but how they are promoted or constrained by public structures and actions. Use the Simplifying Models of *Brain Architecture*, *Serve and Return*, *Skill Begets Skill*, and *Orchestra* to explain these complex interactive systems (see examples below).
- **Uses metaphors, values, and even some principles to help people see *what impedes progress and others to explain how things could work better.*** Use *Toxic Stress* and *Fairness Between Places* to explain what goes wrong. Use the value of Prevention; the metaphors of *Remodeling*; and/or the Principles of *Pay Now or Pay More Later*, *Effectiveness Factors*, and *Return on Investment* to establish the positive aspects of change.
- **Maps these highly potent storytelling tools onto specific programs and policies** and explains how communities can become the "intervening variable" in the story — the turn-around point.

In the following section, we provide examples of these storytelling devices and suggest ways to adapt them to Mississippi. At the end of this section, we put them all together into several narrative examples.

1. What's at Stake? Values to Use

Education Value: Future Preparation

Beginning with this value helps overcome the public's tendency to view education through the narrow lens of student achievement and the parent-teacher-student triad. Given the sense of hopelessness and need for a narrative to encourage a sense of community-building and efficacy, this value can help open up a broader conversation

about the change needed to advance Mississippi's prosperity and well-being. Here's an example of this value:

When we think about our country's future, we need to consider how we can do more to prepare our population to meet future challenges. While we will continue to need the basics, we will also need to add new skills and to update our education system so that it prepares all Americans for the challenges of the 21st century. When we don't prepare for new challenges, our education system isn't working the way it should to maintain and advance our country's quality of life. We could improve our country's prospects for the future if we used our education system to prepare for life and work in the 21st century.

Educational Equity Value: Fairness Between Places

The value of Fairness Between Places helps fill the missing link between educational resources and outcomes for low-income and minority students. It demonstrates that there are problems in the distribution of goods that support education, and this in turn puts schools in some areas at a disadvantage, especially in their ability to acquire the professionally trained teachers and curricula they will need to prepare these students for 21st century jobs. This value acknowledges the disparities that exist between communities in Mississippi, but focuses on the equitable distribution of resources, rather than asking the public to decide whether or not particular individuals or communities “deserve” to be treated better. Here's an example of “Fairness Between Places”:

It is important that we recognize that programs and services are not equally distributed across all communities in our state. Some communities are struggling because they are not given a fair chance to do well. When they are denied the resources they need, they are unable to overcome problems like poor health and education. We need to level the playing field so that every community has access to quality health and education programs and services. Effective education reforms would allocate societal assets more fairly among communities, wherever they are.

Education and Disparities Value: Opportunity for All

We found that the value of Opportunity for All helps overcome the notion of separate fates and allows the public to see how enhancing opportunity through collective efforts could result in a better quality of life for everybody. It helps the public avoid zero-sum thinking that is divisive and to think more broadly about the social benefits of targeted policies. It also allows messaging to take a decidedly more positive approach – speaking to the “opportunity” in policy proposals rather than to the “problems” that those proposals seek to address in Mississippi. The value can be expressed in this way:

Lately there has been a lot of talk about opportunity for all in Mississippi. Some people in our state believe that too many people still face barriers to good health and

education. The ability of the whole state to be successful is undermined when not enough people have access to the things that help them succeed in life. For this reason, we need to ensure that everyone in our state has access to the programs and services that strengthen their wellbeing. Effective ways of ensuring that everybody has access to resources that promote our wellbeing exist and need to be implemented. Only then can we ensure a high better quality of life for everybody.

General Value: Redemption/Lifting Up Mississippi

The value of Redemption or Lifting Up is designed to overcome the sense that inferior outcomes for some children are inevitable, and to remind the public that collective success depends on all children having the opportunity to develop well. It builds on our findings that Mississippians hold a “pride of place” that was strongly connected to the area’s assets, and that they feel a strong desire to “lift up” the Delta and gain respect from the rest of the nation. It is strongly connected to the faith-based belief in the universal right to a second chance. Connecting child development in Mississippi to the concept of lifting up can highlight the assets that exist in Mississippi that can be applied to the challenges of child development. And it can help overcome the “dead last” narrative not by contesting it, but by setting it aside in favor of a new outcome that overtakes the old reality. The value can be expressed as follows:

We can’t let the Delta be held down by old structures and systems that constrain our region. We must lift up the Delta by creating new opportunities for our region to solve problems and innovate. This means we have to start early in getting all children on track to make a contribution to our communities by enhancing the environments they experience very early on and that shape their later abilities. We also have to stop the flood of talented young people out of state as Mississippi is unable to offer them jobs and the ability to stay here and give back. Basic changes to our education system can enhance the well-being of the entire region and help us move forward into the future.

2. How Does It Work?: The Use of Metaphors/Simplifying Models

Education: Orchestra Simplifying Model

The Orchestra simplifying model can help the public imagine a complete education system and consider the relationships among its parts. Because people have difficulty envisioning an educational system at all, this model will help enumerate the parts of the system that people cannot automatically see: superintendents, principals, school boards, communities, etc. The model also puts forward the need for coordination among the parts of the whole, and for an overall positive outcome when the entire system is well-functioning. This can set the stage for innovative, sweeping reform policies. Here’s an example of the Orchestra simplifying model:

Our state's educational system is like an orchestra; it has many groups of players with specialized jobs, such as school boards, taxpayers, families, teachers, principals and administrators. The orchestra sounds best when each musician is skilled, the instruments are well-tuned, and the sections work together in harmony toward the common goal of playing the best music they can. But a changing America and world have handed the orchestra new music to play, and they haven't gotten in sync yet or rehearsed the new repertoire enough to be ready to perform it. No orchestra becomes great overnight, and the beauty of the music depends on lots of small steps, dedicated practice by musicians who have all the resources they need, and an orchestra conductor who can create harmony among all the parts. We can use this orchestra theory to guide how we approach education reform.

Here is a way that this simplifying model could be used to address disparities in educational outcomes. Instead of beginning explicitly with disparities, which can default back to individual effort, it focuses on the inequality of the inputs to the system, and connects them to disparities.

If the orchestra needs to play well together, but some parts of the orchestra have old or malfunctioning instruments, are not getting quality instruction, or are not playing the newest music, then the whole orchestra will be unable to reach its full musical potential.

Education: Remodeling Simplifying Model

The Remodeling simplifying model can help the public understand how education reform works. This will help overcome people's narrow view of reforms as being solely about money, "the basics" and computers. It helps explain what reform would accomplish, how we would go about doing it and what the results would be. It sets the stage for a conversation about what it will take to create an education system in Mississippi that works for all communities and presents that reform as a doable, step-by-step undertaking. Moreover, the tone of the model is pragmatic. This is important, given the fact that conversations about education can be easily derailed by charges of elitism. As one observer has cautioned, "You might describe contemporary American politics as a class struggle between those with more education than money against those with more money than education."^{xx} The Remodeling simplifying model inoculates against this charge by bringing education reform down to earth in ways that resonate across class lines. Here's an example:

When you remodel a house, you do more than just repaint it. You make substantial changes, keeping the previous shape of the house, but updating old parts, and making the house more modern and efficient. Like a general contractor, we have to remodel our educational system so that it enables our society to thrive in today's world. Right now, our educational system is an old house that doesn't do a good job of educating our children or providing society with the skills that America needs. The bad news is that remodeling creates

temporary dust, noise and inconvenience; but the good news is that when you remodel you don't have to start from scratch — you strengthen what's working and fix what's not. If we approach educational reform as remodeling, not demolishing, we will be more successful in giving our children what they need.

Early Child Development: The Brain Architecture Simplifying Model

This model clearly articulates *what* develops, and emphasizes that brains are built through early, interactive experiences. These early experiences lay the foundation for future cognitive, emotional and social development. It also makes child development concrete and physical, rather than vague and residing in character, behavior or parenting. Here's one example of the model:

The early years of life matter because early experiences affect the architecture of the maturing brain. As it emerges, the quality of that architecture establishes either a sturdy or a fragile foundation for all of the development and behavior that follows — and getting things right the first time is easier than trying to fix them later.

Early Child Development: Serve and Return Simplifying Model

This model explains *how* development happens, emphasizing the way that healthy relationships shape brain development. It strengthens the idea that the environments surrounding children are important, including parents as well as non-familial caregivers. Here's one example of the model:

Scientists now know that the interactive influences of genes and experience shape the developing brain. The active ingredient is the “serve and return” relationships children have with their parents and other caregivers in their family or community, that is, a back-and-forth quality like a game of tennis or volleyball that actually strengthens the physical circuits of the brain. Relationships that do not have that quality — because of lack of training and education, too many children in a setting or caregiver depression — have a damaging effect on the architecture of the maturing brain, and hence on the healthy development of children.

Early Child Development: Skill Begets Skill Simplifying Model

This model help emphasizes the cascading effects of early brain development. It acknowledges that developing brains are built during a succession of “sensitive” periods associated with the development of particular circuits related to specific abilities. The development of increasingly complicated skills is built on the skills formed earlier. Here's one example of the model:

Scientists also now know that children's brains are built “from the bottom up,” with simple circuits and skills providing the scaffolding for more advanced

circuits and skills over time. According to this view, the circuits that underlie the ability to put words together to speak in phrases form a foundation for the subsequent mastery of reading a written sentence in a book.

Early Child Development: Toxic Stress Simplifying Model

This model offers an explanation of how development can go wrong and why. It differentiates between types of stress so that the public correctly focuses on the impact of adverse early experiences. This model emphasizes that stress can be mitigated by supportive environments and illuminates the fact that dealing with toxic stress is important because of the life-long impacts on mental and physical health.

Scientists now know that “toxic stress” in early childhood is associated with such things as extreme poverty, abuse or severe maternal depression, and damages the developing brain. It is important to distinguish among three kinds of stress. We do not need to worry about positive stress (which is short-lived stress, like getting immunized). Tolerable stress is made tolerable by the presence of supportive relationships, like a strong family when a loved one dies. But toxic stress lasts longer, lacks consistent supportive relationships and leads to lifelong problems in learning, behavior, and both physical and mental health.

3. What is the Result of the Solutions You Offer?

Principles like Effectiveness Factors and Pay Now or Pay Later can be used to great effect once solutions have been introduced in a narrative. In effect, they draw out the conclusions from the policies, a process that ordinary people often cannot complete themselves. They answer the question: If we do this, what is the outcome, beyond just another program?

Pay Now or Pay More Later

This narrative element focuses on the importance of early intervention to prevent later (and more expensive) problems. It can be expressed in the following way:

Trying to change behavior or build new skills on a foundation of brain circuits that were not wired properly when they were first formed requires more work and is less effective. Remedial education, clinical treatment and other professional interventions are more costly and produce less desirable outcomes than the provision of nurturing, protective relationships and appropriate learning experiences earlier in life. The exaggerated neurological response to toxic stress never goes away, with costly consequences for both children and society.

Effectiveness factors

We can measure “effectiveness factors” that often make the difference between programs that work and those that don’t work to support children’s healthy development. Without these effectiveness factors, some children can spend just as many hours in a program, but not show many positive outcomes.

Measuring Return on Investment:

In addition, we can evaluate the efficiency of programs for young children by comparing the benefit of the investment to the cost. This allows a reliable comparison between programs that don’t improve child development and those that show real results.

The New Story Comes to Life in Three Examples

1. *Here is an example of how the above frame elements might be woven together in Mississippi:*

Mississippi needs to be able to overcome what’s been holding our state down and ensure a brighter future by preparing all young Mississippians to make a contribution. When we think about our country’s future, we need to consider how we can do more to prepare our state for the challenges that we’ll be facing in the next decades. Our education system provides a window on the future of our state and our country. While students will continue to need the basics, we will also need to give them new skills by updating our K-12 and higher education systems so that they prepare all Americans for the challenges our state faces. When we don’t prepare for new challenges, our education system can’t work the way it should to maintain and advance our shared quality of life. [Values: *Redemption, Future Preparation*]

Mississippi has been making some significant improvements that are critical for entering the 21st century, despite Katrina, despite the destruction of key industries like agriculture and fishing. Mississippi has shown its promise in lifting up the region from outdated programs and policies that would hold it back. As the 2010 State of the South report concludes, “The region now features homegrown businesses that compete across the globe. Southern states and communities have embraced public school reforms, have strengthened systems of community colleges and universities, and have invested in highways and airports. At issue now is whether the South’s citizens and their leaders will see in the advances of the past three decades a reason for hope and confidence that the region can rise to the challenges of the recovery and beyond.”^{xxi} [*Highlighting Solutions*]

But Mississippi can’t make progress until it resolves a number of critical, residual problems including: (1) problems in the distribution of its educational resources across different parts of the state and (2) the lasting effects on children’s ability to develop and learn as a result of early exposure to toxic stressors in their environments. These residual problems serve as a weight, holding Mississippi down and preventing it from moving forward into the 21st century. Removing these barriers

to Mississippi's future requires us to remodel the education system by keeping what's working and updating what is holding our state back. [*Fairness Between Places, Toxic Stress*]

These are man-made problems that can be overcome with man-made solutions. When Mississippians don't come together to resolve these issues, they let the state go backward. Because Mississippi will need all its social capital, all its young people to become productive and capable members of Mississippi's communities if the state is to thrive. Put another way, Mississippi can't afford to lose any of the talents its young people offer to other states; we need them here, giving back and raising up our state. When we do not develop these talents or do not provide the opportunities to use them in Mississippi by offering good jobs, we forsake our own future. [*Highlighting Solutions*]

2. *Here is an example of framing a very specific policy — high-quality early child care — using the framing recommendations:*

In order to lift our state up and build a more prosperous future, Mississippi must prioritize the early development of all our children. That future is unlikely to be realized as long as all of our children don't share in the opportunity to develop to their fullest potential. We can improve our state's prospects by investing in innovative programs that increase the likelihood that Mississippi can move forward. Creating a system of high-quality early child care and development will ensure that the next generation will pay this investment back with dividends through a lifetime of productivity and responsible citizenship. We have an opportunity to strengthen this system by creatively building on the pilot areas for the Mississippi Child Care Quality Step System (MCCQSS), a program to increase child care quality throughout the state by recognizing and rewarding high-quality providers. [*Values: Lifting Up/Redemption and Future Prosperity*]

Quality early childhood development programs are important because children's brain architecture is built from the bottom up. Early experiences lay the groundwork for all of the development that follows. Trying to change behavior or build new skills on a foundation of brain circuits that were not wired properly when they were first formed requires more work and is less effective. Remedial education, clinical treatment and other professional interventions are more costly and produce less desirable outcomes than the provision of nurturing, protective relationships and appropriate learning experiences earlier in life. [*Brain Architecture*]

The MCCQSS can contribute in two important ways to strong brain development. First, it encourages better pay and retention of child care providers. This is important because children's brains develop best in an environment of strong, consistent, nurturing relationships. These relationships include a "serve and return" process where children's attempts to interact with adults are met with attention and returned, much like serving and returning a ball in a game of tennis. When children lack these enriching interactions, such as child care centers where the staff changes frequently

and isn't trained in how to interact with children in positive ways, children will have less opportunity to develop critical parts of their brains. [*Serve and Return*]

The MCCQSS also has the potential to stabilize and support a network of child care centers. This stability is important because some children in their care are experiencing what scientists term "toxic stress." When children experience such stressful pressures as extreme poverty, abuse or severe maternal depression, they can develop an exaggerated stress response, and the probability of poor outcomes increases. These child care centers can serve as important buffers to toxic stress and help limit the negative consequences of toxic stress on children's physical and mental health. [*Toxic Stress*]

Mississippi has made significant efforts to use available funds for poor children and families to support the child care certificate program. These good first steps put money where it can be built on by strengthening and expanding the MCCQSS program, ensuring a more prosperous future for the state in years to come. [*Solutions, Future Prosperity*]

3. *Finally, here is an example of the translation process in action, using the framing recommendations to transform a "policy ask" into a complete story:*

Here's the raw data, taken from a 2008 Mississippi Children's Defense Fund report:

Increased Education Funding for K-12 and At Risk Students

The CDF-SRO has worked diligently to ensure that the Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP) is fully funded. MAEP is the formula by which the state of Mississippi ensures that every school in every district has adequate resources for educating students in kindergarten through 12th grade regardless of where they live or the wealth of their community. The legislature fully funded MAEP in 2003 and 2007, responding to the support CDF- SRO and its partner generated. Full funding represented an increase of more than \$260 million for schools over the prior years' funding, and we continue working to ensure that MAEP is fully funded every year. CDF-SRO also works with legislative leaders to secure additional funding for the state's "at risk" students, defined as those receiving a reduced price or free lunch. The January 2006 Report of the Commission on Restructuring the Mississippi Adequate Education Program, presented to the Mississippi legislature, recommended that the state's at-risk funding be substantially increased. Currently, Mississippi provides an additional 5 percent funding for these students. It cost more money to educate children who come from economically disadvantaged communities.

Here is this data translated into story, using FrameWorks' Mississippi recommendations:

If we are to lift our state up, now and in the future, we must begin by ensuring that educational resources are fairly distributed across communities. Mississippi cannot afford to limit its talent pool by having great differences in educational quality from place to place. We must improve our state's prospects by making sure that, wherever

you live in Mississippi, you have access to a good teacher and classroom resources. If we fail to adequately update our educational system, some areas will have good educational systems and others will not. Our state's workforce and leadership will do much better if it is able to draw from well-prepared students, no matter where they live. That's why fairer distribution of education resources to communities must be the key to education policy reform in Mississippi. [*Values of Future Preparation, Lifting up/Redemption and Fairness Between Places*]

One solution that has worked well for Mississippi promises to do even better if it is allowed to be built up to scale. The Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP) is the formula by which the state of Mississippi ensures that every school in every district has adequate resources for educating students in kindergarten through 12th grade regardless of where they live or the wealth of their community. It is the vehicle by which we assure that the distribution of educational resources is working fairly in our state. [*Introduces program, re-anchors it in the value of Fairness Between Places*]

When this program is fully funded, it invests our state's dollars wisely and prevents the need for larger investments down the road when education systems have already failed our children. When it is underfunded, it just delays the costs and increases the risks of educational failure. [*Pay Now or Pay More Later*].

But not all children come to school with the same starting point. So some need an extra boost to get up to speed in the classroom. Currently, Mississippi provides an additional 5 percent funding for these students because it costs more money to educate children who come from economically disadvantaged communities. These communities already lack educational resources in the form of libraries, volunteers and after-school or summer programs that keep children on track for development. [*Context - explains why vulnerable children are vulnerable*]

By making even this minimal investment, we can make sure that some of these missing resources are made available in these places, with the result that these children can become part of a productive base for their communities and for Mississippi's future. [*Prosperity*]

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Reframing is hard. It requires us to do some important re-education of our own thinking and habits of communication. But it's necessary. As a saying often attributed to Albert Einstein notes, "The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them." To change the way that communities engage around education and early child development in Mississippi requires a new narrative that people can use to make sense of their lives, to see the possibility for change and to wrangle that change down into concrete examples. The FrameWorks Institute is pleased to provide the first draft of such a new story, but the real work comes in communities as

ordinary citizens grapple with these new ways to explain to themselves and others why the status quo is neither acceptable nor inevitable.

Key Resources

- Talking About Early Child Development Toolkit
- Education Reform Toolkit
- Talking About Disparities Toolkit

All at <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/cdtoolkits.html>.

About the Institute

The FrameWorks Institute is a national nonprofit think tank devoted to framing public issues to bridge the divide between public and expert understandings. Its work is based on Strategic Frame Analysis™, a multi-method, multi-disciplinary approach to empirical research. FrameWorks designs, commissions, publishes, explains and applies communications research to prepare nonprofit organizations to expand their constituency base, to build public will, and to further public understanding of specific social issues — the environment, government, race, children’s issues and health care, among others. Its work is unique in its breadth — from qualitative, quantitative and experimental research to applied communications toolkits, eWorkshops, advertising campaigns, FrameChecks™ and Framing Study Circles. See www.frameworksinstitute.org

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ⁱ For more on this communications approach, see our eWorkshop: “Changing the Public Conversation on Social Problems: A Beginner’s Guide to Strategic Frame Analysis.” <http://sfa.frameworksinstitute.org/>

ⁱⁱ Bales, S., & Bowen, L. (unpublished). *Framing community engagement in the Mississippi Delta: A FrameWorks MessageMemo*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

ⁱⁱⁱ Johansen, B. (2010). *Her daughter was one of them: How personal narratives attach to public issues in Mississippi news coverage*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
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