



Education Meets Budgets & Taxes, featuring *SWAMPED!* : A MessageBrief

Fiscal policy should be understood as every progressive issue advocate's "second" issue. While education advocates focus on specific policy objectives – from after-school programs to teacher training – all depend on the successful negotiation of the state and federal budget process. When frames about education meet up with talk about budgets and taxes, bad things lurk in the "swamp" of public thinking. With funding from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the FrameWorks Institute created a game environment, called *SWAMPED!*, to allow you to navigate the swamp of public thinking for both education and budgets and taxes, and where you must frame effectively to survive! When you play *SWAMPED!*, you first take a tour of the swamp, using FrameWorks' research to illuminate the traps and holes you will encounter in communicating these two issues. Then, your framing abilities are tested as you move around the obstacles in public thinking. Again, you get to use FrameWorks' proven framing strategies as navigate the swamp.

As an additional resource, this MessageBrief succinctly reviews and summarizes findings from FrameWorks' research on both budgets and taxes and education. In particular, it serves to remind players of *SWAMPED!* of the key *Do's* and *Don'ts* for improving the public's understanding of the linked topics of budgets and taxes in education reform, and for shifting support for education policy alternatives.

The "swamp" of public thinking about Education and Budgets & Taxes

In the "swamp," there are three dominant cultural models that overlap between the two issues, creating toxic combos. These are the cognitive places where your communications are likely to break down because of the synergy between the two issues. Below is a quick tour of each area of the swamp to learn how the issues combine to create obstacles to your mission. In addition, each area includes advice to help you navigate these obstacles.

LITTLE PICTURE THINKING

Americans' knowledge of education and budget and tax *systems* is limited. Americans tend to rely on their personal knowledge about education and to see only teachers, students and parents. People also fail to associate public budgets with taxes and budgeting goals. These "little picture" tendencies can be thought of as toxic combos, reinforcing each other at the cross section of these two issues:

Education	Budgets and Taxes
People default to the tangible triad – parents, teachers and students – as the only key actors in education.	People default to household budgets to understand public budgets.
People discount the value of preschool or higher education in comparison to K-12 education.	People think about budgets in terms of meeting immediate needs and short-term goals.
People believe that education takes place in schools and excludes the surrounding community.	People believe that public budgets only have an impact in their immediate surroundings rather than on society at large.
The relationships among the multitude of actors that comprise the education system are poorly understood.	The relationship between taxes and what they provide (budgets) is poorly understood.

HERE’S WHAT TO DO TO AVOID LITTLE PICTURE THINKING:

1. **Discuss our education system using the value of “future preparation,” and budgets with the value of “prevention.”** “Future preparation” helps people understand that a new set of skills and experiences are necessary for our country’s future. Public budgets can be also used to ensure a prosperous future – by “preventing” future problems before they occur, like funding education today. In both cases, make the goal a collective one – it’s about our country – not an individual one.
2. **Explain the systems of education and budgets & taxes using the simplifying models of “orchestra” and “forward exchange.”** The analogy of “orchestra” to the education system helps people imagine a complete coordinated system of multiple players and the relationships among its many parts. The model of “forward exchange” helps people see how public goods and services are distributed in time, and how taxes make them possible. Talk about how we pay taxes forward, so we can have the goods we will need in the future, just as we benefit from those that were paid in the past to meet community needs now.

DON’T:

1. **Don’t call attention to the tangible triad of parents, teachers and students when talking about education.** These cues inspire “little picture thinking” and obscure the societal benefits education provides. Don’t focus on the “caring teacher” as it ignores the larger system of resources and rewards in which teachers teach.

2. **Don't compare public budgets to household budgets.** The analogy of household budgets = public budgets evokes little picture standards of individual discipline and sacrifice that don't align with the metaphors of "prevention" and "forward exchange."

3. **Don't lead with traditional government frames or discuss taxes before or without budgets. If you invoke government without framing it, people will be left with** negative notions of vast bureaucracy, waste and corruption. Also, discussing taxes before or without budgets will feed into the conclusion that taxes are little more than the unfair takings of greedy politicians, not a means to a public end; funding our priorities for the future.

INDIVIDUALISM

Americans think about many social issues in distinctly individualized, consumerist ways. For education and budgets & taxes, Americans believe that "you should get out of the system no less than what you put in." They are wary of free riders that don't pay their fair share and take more from budgets and public education than they deserve. FrameWorks research shows that unfortunately, education, as a *collective* investment, is not on people's radar. These "individualist" tendencies are described below:

Education	Budgets and Taxes
People think of education as a consumer good.	People think government should work like a vending machine: you should get back what you pay in.
Blame for education system failures falls to individual students who lack the discipline and motivation to succeed.	Blame for failures falls to government wastrels who lack the discipline and restraint of responsible individuals who must manage personal budgets.
People think in zero-sum ways, which leads them to oppose policies that seem to favor the poor at the cost of the middle class.	People think in zero-sum ways about budgets and taxes, which pits people who pay more against those who pay less.
People lack an understanding of the shared fate citizens have in a functional education system.	People lack an understanding of the broader societal infrastructures that budgets and taxes support and provide to communities.

HERE'S WHAT TO DO TO AVOID INDIVIDUALIST THINKING:

1. **Discuss our education system using the value of “future preparation” and “the common good,” and budgets & taxes with the value of “prevention.”** Values of “future preparation” and “prevention” help people shift their individualist thinking toward the ideal of society’s shared goals. Also, the notion of “common good” – that we all benefit when we prevent problems and plan for the future – is useful when reframing discussions about government. Remember to be explicit that this is about our country, not just about individuals.
2. **Discuss educational equality and the distribution of resources through “fairness between places.”** Use the “fairness between places” value to emphasize equitable resource distribution and de-emphasize individual responsibility and competition that often undercut the efficacy of education and budget systems. Preparing for our country’s future requires us to ensure that educational resources are distributed fairly and reach all places.

DON'T:

1. **Don't reinforce consumerist thinking.** Encouraging people to consider what they're getting in exchange for what they're putting in makes people feel shortchanged by government and education.
2. **Don't reinforce the notion that education is the responsibility of individuals.** When advocates talk about education in terms of individual achievement, they overlook what is at stake for society in having an educated workforce, and what policies need to be put in place to make the system work better for everyone.
3. **Don't talk about budgets and taxes as investments.** When people associate taxes with investments, they tend to focus on the risks associated with investing and the fact that investments are made through individual choices.
4. **Don't talk about the mission of education in terms of eliminating “the achievement gap.”** When advocates use the metaphor of a “gap,” it tends to set up zero-sum thinking, or the notion that any benefit enjoyed by someone else will be made at their expense.
5. **Don't talk about fairness as a goal for tax reform.** When fairness is evoked, it leads people to think the easiest and most available way to make taxes “fair” is having everyone pay the same amount (e.g., a flat tax).

CRISIS THINKING

Many Americans think that both our education, and budget and tax systems are broken beyond repair. While one might expect this to fuel support for reform, it doesn't help people see solutions to these problems. People grow overwhelmed, disengage entirely or default to little picture thinking. They fear innovation and transformation.

Here are the framing challenges associated with crisis thinking:

Education	Budgets and Taxes
People believe that our education system is hopelessly broken, so no improvement is possible.	People believe that government is wasteful by definition, so funding it would be counterproductive.
People fear that aggressive education reforms make an already broken system even worse.	People think cutting spending and making painful choices are the best ways to fix budget crises.
There is no scalable reform that fits the size of the "crisis."	People lack a past or future context for the use of tax dollars and the budgets they fund, so any action is perceived as a "drop in the bucket."

The challenges of crisis thinking can be addressed by combining FrameWorks' messaging strategies for both education and budgets & taxes, leaving us with several do's and don'ts:

HERE'S WHAT TO DO TO AVOID CRISIS THINKING:

- 1. Make clear the budget priorities and societal goals for reform using the "future preparation" value and "remodeling" metaphor.** Use of the value "future preparation" will remind people of the broader societal goals that underlie the process of reform. Also, use of the "remodeling" metaphor (akin to remodeling a house) helps people understand how reform works – what it does, how it gets accomplished, with what practical results.
- 2. Use social math to put the plan in context.** Without effective use of social math (or contextualization by analogy), numbers often seem arbitrary to the public, or worse, make people anxious about size and scope of the reform. Presenting numbers in a way that gives people perspective helps to avoid these pitfalls.

3. **Explain budgets through “pay now or pay more later.”** The “pay now or pay more later” frame is effective at articulating a need for long-term budget decisions and shifting conversations away from both individualistic and short-term conversations.
4. **Talk about “the basics” PLUS innovative skills.** Use the value of “future preparation” to talk about what Americans will need to learn to work in the 21st century – both basic skills and newer skills available through innovative curricula.

DON'T:

1. **Don't embrace crisis thinking.** “Crisis” frames play to a familiar and widely accepted condemnation of the education and tax systems. “Crisis fatigue,” a kind of mental weariness that arises from exposure to the daily news drumbeat of societal crises, soon takes hold.
2. **Don't assume you can talk about the skills children will need for the 21st century workforce without first framing the issue.** When people think about skills without aid of additional framing, they focus on “the basics” or computers, and have trouble seeing the value of innovative reform or curricula.
3. **Don't assume that more money will be appreciated as equating to innovation.** When people reason about the need for new skills and educational experiences, without helpful framing, they are skeptical that more money will solve the problems.
4. **Don't frame the discussion in utopian or idealistic terms.** When people are confronted with what they consider to be impractical goals, they first consider the ideal and then they compare it to their impressions of how things really work. Their perceived distance between the two drives them to see the problem as too big to resolve. This shuts down thinking about solutions.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of FrameWorks Institute.

Please follow standard APA rules for citation, with FrameWorks Institute as publisher. Education Meets Budgets and Taxes, featuring *SWAMPED!* 2012. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

© FrameWorks Institute 2012