



## **Promoting productive and hopeful conversations about education reform: Integrating strategic framing into public outreach on Common Core**

FrameWorks Institute

Education reform is front and center in California nowadays. The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) passed into law last July and the implementation of the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS) both offer opportunities to make much-needed improvements to the way our education system works. They also open the door to more robust public conversations in communities across California about how children learn, what developing brains need in order to build strong cognitive, social, and emotional skills, and what resources our schools need to ensure their success.

Those conversations can't wait – yet at the same time, beginning them can feel difficult or even daunting, especially in our state, where public perspectives are as diverse as our landscape. Strategic Frame Analysis™, an evidence-based approach to communications on complex social and scientific issues developed by the FrameWorks Institute, is one way that nonprofit and public sector education organizations across our state have begun to take up the task of talking with the public about the Common Core and performance-based learning. Communicators using this approach learn to make intentional, research-based choices about how to frame these issues for their audiences: how to start, what to emphasize, what to leave unsaid, and how to make the “whys and hows” of the new standards as “sticky,” or memorable, as possible. Strategic framing develops communicators’ ability to engage the public in productive conversations about education reform, linking discussions of Common Core standards to a broader “core story” of education, building optimism and support for effective change.

A sampler of some of the key framing techniques are included in this article. The research behind these recommendations draws on social science theory and methods and involved extensive testing in the US; researchers surveyed nearly 28,000 people and analyzed more than 2,100 media stories, in addition to conducting dozens of in-depth interviews and peer discussion groups. Californians were included in the research, making up over 10% of the sample. As a result, communicators can have confidence that these themes and messages will have a reliable effect with the public.

# Practical Tools for Effective Communications about Common Core and Ed Reform

Strategic Frame Analysis™ points to three powerful reframing tools—Values, Explanatory Metaphors, and Solutions—that can help the public to understand why the instructional shifts are important, how they work, and what roles our communities can and should play in their implementation.

## Using Values to Establish What’s at Stake

Values, or broad ideals about what’s desirable and good, act as a starting point on a topic, guiding attitudes, reasoning and decisions that follow. Opening communications with a value can orient people’s thinking on the topic, setting up for success in the interaction that follows. Among several values that FrameWorks tested experimentally, Future Preparation showed broad appeal and Progress was especially helpful in talking about skills and learning. Human Potential showed impressive results in shifting public thinking on assessment and equity issues. The value descriptions below capture the essence of these tested ideas; they aren’t necessarily intended to be used verbatim.

### *Future Preparation*

We need to ensure that our future leaders have the skills required to tackle the problems of tomorrow.

### *Progress*

This is about moving forward toward our shared goals—updating what we do so that it is in keeping with the times.

### *Human Potential*

We need the talents and contributions of all learners to be available to our communities.

Expressing the benefits of education collective, rather than individual, terms is an important part of a strategy of reclaiming the narrative about education as a public good. Values can be used to begin a conversation about the designated outcomes of Common Core (“Twenty-first-century challenges are adding to the kinds of knowledge today’s students require to be prepared to lead our country in the future. The Common Core standards are designed with those needs in mind—they emphasize mastery of traditional content but within the context of a technologically and globally complex future.”) Or, they

might be instrumental in moving away from consumerist thinking about education and reclaiming the narrative of public education for the common good (“Yes, a good education can contribute to a person’s financial success, but have you considered how the entire state will benefit socially and economically from an education system that supports all children’s potential for high achievement?”) Whether used at the beginning of a conversation or elsewhere, values are a more effective way of engaging people in an issue than framing it as a response to a crisis or making the case that it will primarily benefit specific groups.



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### **Using an Explanatory Metaphor to Explain the Problem**

FrameWorks research supports the findings of many other studies into public knowledge of education reform: the American public simply doesn’t understand how children learn. As a result, they easily revert to ways of thinking about teaching and learning that contradict what we now know to be true about the learning process and skills mastery. The dominant model of learning involves thinking of it as a passive, difficult process; good students must buckle down, be quiet, pay attention to the teacher, and above all, listen. Taking a moment to reframe “teaching” as active, engaged pedagogy that fosters higher-order thinking and skills is therefore a critical step in every discussion about the Common Core standards—it should never be taken for granted.

Metaphors are familiar to us all as poetic devices, but FrameWorks’ research shows that they can also be uniquely powerful devices for thinking. An explanatory metaphor is a simple, concrete, and memorable comparison that quickly and effectively explains an abstract or complex topic. FrameWorks tested several candidate metaphors for communicating about the learning process – likening the role of the student to those of craftsmen or drivers, for example. Cooking with Information was one of the most effective and reliable in helping the public to think productively about the skills children need to master and how they can best learn them.

*Cooking with Information:* “Children have to know how to use information like cooks use ingredients. This involves selecting, evaluating, and combining the ingredients in a hands-on, exploratory way.”

This metaphor uses an “easy to think” analogy that allows the public to reimagine learning as a rich endeavor that imparts lifelong skills through hands-on practice, collaboration, and capable use of technology. It also allows for a more robust understanding of what good assessment looks like. How do you know when you have cooked well? You taste it – and you ask others to taste it. You’d be foolish to wait until the dish is on the table to check its quality; rather, you take little bites along the way, adjust, and check again. In this way, the metaphor can help the public understand that assessment is essential to good instruction, not an unreasonable mandate, and it can seed a more productive discussion with policymakers around the need for performance assessment, self-assessment, and peer assessment.

The instructional shifts required by Common Core are changes –and talking about change is something that must always be framed carefully, lest the public infers that this is merely another pie-in-the-sky effort destined to be replaced by the next newfangled fad, or that it is too disruptive to be worth it. Among the explanatory metaphors FrameWorks tested for communicating about education reform, Remodeling was the most consistent and reliable in expanding public understanding of why the education system needs to be updated and how we can do it effectively:

*Remodeling:* “The changes we need to make to our education system are like remodeling a valuable but outdated house – keeping what works, updating what doesn’t, to make it more functional for today’s needs.”

This metaphor can teach the basic concept behind education reform—and reframe the public conversation away from alternatives that are more about razing and rebuilding anew. Like all metaphors, it communicates these concepts in succinct, easy-to-understand manner. This metaphor in particular sets up a conversation about the plans for remodeling, allowing spokespeople to build on the metaphor with clear explanations of what the Common Core will change and update. It also allows space to acknowledge the discomfort that comes with change – we can expect a bit of dust and noise, but this is temporary, and in the end, well worth it.

### **The Case for Explanation: Building Public Support for Evidence-Based Solutions**

Preparing the listener to see how the actions being taken will make things better is a vital part of effective framing. When communicators neglect to draw a clear link between a problem and its solution in ways that support non-experts’ ability to understand the connection and what’s at stake, a crucial opportunity for gaining the public’s trust and engagement is lost. FrameWorks’ research revealed that a sense of fatalism – a belief that the problem is too big to solve or the proposed solutions are bound to fail – is especially prevalent on the issue of education reform. A conversation infused with tested shared

values, clear explanatory chains, and simplifying metaphors can overcome this tendency and help the public to reach more productive conclusions about the solution.

This kind of preparation, inviting the public to think about the problem the way experts do, can move people toward systems thinking, or a “wide-angle lens” perspective. Experts know that education is a public good: a well-educated population is crucial to the strength of our democracy and our nation’s economic success – big-picture items that affect us all. And they understand that outdated pedagogy undermines that goal. The default story in our popular discourse, however, is a consumer narrative in which education is a limited commodity and parents must compete with each other for the best “product.” But the “public good” story is available in their thinking – it just needs to be brought forward through communications cues. An audience primed with a more expansive frame can more readily sidestep unproductive, narrowly consumerist models. Reminding the public of collective benefits and shared civic-minded values can redirect thinking from “me” to “we,” shifting policy preferences in the process.



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Our research shows that giving the public the opportunity to think like the experts do about an issue increases public support for policy solutions. Values and metaphors are easy-to-read signposts that lead audiences to understand instruction and assessment the way education experts do; building that knowledge base is an important step toward explaining the what, how, and why of the Common Core standards in ways that make sense to a general audience. But a good dose of clear explanation – unpacking what affects what, and to what end – goes a very long way as well. For example, the public lacks a clear understanding of how learning happens, why our education system needs updating, and how the Common Core can improve student outcomes. Although many people have formed strong feelings about the Common Core, few know what teachers and other education professionals do about the science of learning. To gain public support for Common Core implementation, communicators need to take a few steps back from the particulars of the policy, and focus more on the big ideas and assumptions behind it. That means explaining how Common Core is addressing outdated ideas about instruction and

assessment. It means doing less “branding” and more “expanding.” Repeating the often-used phrase that standards are “expectations for what students should know and be able to do” isn’t all bad, but it isn’t going quite far enough for the public. Consider taking a moment to explain the underlying logic of curricular standards: clear, shared goals allow a system to have a coherent plan that lets schools coordinate across grade levels and across schools. In turn, this makes it possible for educators to share ideas, and for entire states and districts to make sure that as students move through school, they are building skills and knowledge in a sensible fashion – neither repeating the same thing time and again, nor missing essential concepts. Accomplishing this through a carefully planned list of key goals, rather than one big mandated curriculum, lets teachers have flexibility to customize to student interests and needs.

Explanation is a valuable and worthy goal for communications. When advocates and policymakers use their communications opportunities to explain issues to the public, they help people become more informed decision makers.

### **Education Advocates Are Building a Reframing “Community of Practice”**

As the education community continues to work on the challenge of communicating about education reform and the Common Core standards, it’s important to learn about what makes the difference between effective and ineffective outreach on this topic. There’s solid evidence that some ways of framing the issue are likely to decrease public engagement and support – for instance, emphasizing how a poor education can harm an individual’s lifetime earning prospects. Instead, effective framing builds people’s understanding of underlying causes and introduces them to well-matched, collective solutions, so that the public understands how to best address the problem.

These framing strategies are designed for use by educators, advocates, and researchers across the country who are engaged in nonprofit and public sector efforts to improve our schools. The California coalition working on the CCSS campaign will be participating in a variety of communications capacity-building activities to equip teachers, advocates, and other supporters of the Common Core standards to communicate more powerfully about education reform. You can learn more about this project at <http://cdefoundation.org/ccss-campaign/>.