



A FrameWorks MessageMemo

**Get in Where You Fit in:
The Role of Teachers' Unions in Public Conversations
About Education Reform**

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Introduction

Publicly funded education has been a cornerstone of American society. Lately, however, there has been an increasingly bitter and partisan debate about how to reverse declines in the performance of American schoolchildren. The last two decades have seen European and Asian countries leapfrog America on any number of standardized measures of student achievement – particularly in math and the sciences. In response, the federal government has launched major initiatives to reform American public education. More than two decades after the publication of the landmark *A Nation at Risk*, the Bush administration’s *No Child Left Behind* program and the more recent *Race to the Top* project of the Obama administration are two major examples of continuing national “catch up” attempts at education reform. Likewise, cities and states have advanced a plethora of reforms aimed at improving public education. Education reform is, and has been for some time, squarely on the American agenda. If issue salience were all that was needed to advance policy reform, one might assume education to be a highly prioritized and funded part of the American agenda. As budgets are continually cut, however, and teachers let go, it appears that issue salience is not sufficient to move education policy forward. What, then, stands in the way of better educational policy?

In this MessageMemo, we argue that a strong and cohesive public narrative has been created that distracts from the larger goals of education reform in favor of a narrow, personalized agenda that places most of the blame for educational problems on teachers. That is, we are interested in how explanations for a major systemic problem devolve so quickly and consistently to public views about greedy, lazy and defective teachers. We share the concern among education reformers that teachers, and especially teachers’ unions, have become the scapegoat in the public conversation. As a result of this scapegoating, teachers and teachers’ unions are denigrated, their voices are problematically silenced in education reform and, perhaps most importantly, “fixing education” is reduced to a simple formula of subtracting the influence of the teachers’ unions. A recent editorial in the *Los Angeles Times* highlights this line of attack:

“In recent times, UTLA has been defensive, adversarial and obstructionist in response to a range of reform efforts. It has reflexively opposed most charter schools. It has seemed determined to protect mediocre teachers at the expense of great ones and to interfere with changes that could benefit children. As a result, the union has become the focus of much of the city’s outrage about the state of public education.” Los Angeles Times, July 10, 2011

It is clear that teachers, teachers’ unions and education reformers have much in common in figuring out how to unravel this pejorative narrative. The communications task set before us, therefore, is how to effectively talk with the general public about education reform, quality teaching, and the role that teachers’ unions could and must play in progressive reforms in ways that are more consistent with the views of experts who study the system over time.ⁱ As a result of a series of qualitative and quantitative investigations, FrameWorks’ research has identified four main impediments to a productive public conversation:

1. People cannot envision the full array of actors and factors that constitute the education system and, thus, default exclusively to the most visible and concrete actors – teachers – holding them accountable for most if not all learning outcomes.
2. The public is ambivalent about education “reform.” People are dissatisfied with the status quo but also skeptical and fearful of widespread change. In their search to find changes that “fit” their understanding of the problem, both in source and scale, changing the motivation of teachers provides an option that is easy to think – not too big and not too small.
3. This solution is further aided by the fact that quality teaching is understood to be about teacher “caring”; if teaching is, thus, not seen as a profession but rather as an avocation, then improving motivation will enhance output.
4. Because teachers’ unions are seen as exclusively concerned with teacher pay and benefits, they are perceived to be at odds with optimal teacher motivation (“caring”) and diametrically opposed to progress in learning and student outcomes.

Taken as a whole, these assessments distort public thinking, lead advocates into tempting traps, and ultimately require a reengineering of the larger narrative about education reform. Thus solving the problem of teachers’ unions requires restructuring the way that people think about the education system, education reform, and quality teaching. This is not a problem that is limited to the teachers’ unions, but that affects everyone who seeks to explain to the public why the system isn’t working and what can and should be done to make it work better. Such reframing efforts must show that teachers’ unions do more than simply advocate for the material benefit of their constituents, they also support effective teaching by professionalizing the field, and in this way are productive contributors to improving the American system of education. Without this corrective narrative, the “easy solution” of fixing teacher motivation (and the unions that place money above caring) will continue to serve as the top-of-mind definition of education reform. It is clear from expert input that this is far from the agenda that is needed to get American education back on track.

What would a reframed narrative look like, one capable of setting up a broader agenda for education reform, in which teachers and teachers’ unions stand to play positive roles? Over the last few years the FrameWorks Institute has undertaken an ambitious research agenda with the goal of finding effective ways to influence the broader public conversation about education reform. The goal of this MessageMemo is to demonstrate how to pivot from the broader conversation about education reform in a way that incorporates teaching quality and teachers’ unions into the reform conversation. We accomplish this goal by drawing on a pioneering methodology developed by the FrameWorks Institute called *Strategic Frame Analysis*TM to: (1) document the cultural models available to ordinary people when they think about education reform, teachers, and teachers’ unions; (2) understand how patterns of news coverage inform and reflect these patterns of thinking; (3) observe these models in action as small groups of people discuss issues related to teachers, unions, reform and the educational system; (4) identify the challenges for communicating about these issues; and (5) experiment with reframes that might evoke a more productive discussion.

This MessageMemo follows the general organizational template laid out by the Institute in earlier reportsⁱⁱ identifying:

1. **The Mental Landscape** – those patterns of thinking that are chronically accessible as people consider education reform, teachers, and teachers’ unions.
2. **Redirections** – strategies that emerge from the qualitative and quantitative analysis and offer ways to reframe discussions of education reforms to include teaching quality and teachers’ unions.
3. **Traps** – communications strategies that appear promising on the surface, but that actually have the potential to derail productive public engagement.

Taken together, these observations serve to reveal the logic that currently informs public thinking, to identify places in that narrative that are amenable to redirection and to explain how the overall story can be re-engineered to achieve a better conceptual base, one more open to policies and programs that education reformers believe would actually improve the system.

Research Base

We report the findings from a series of studies that cross time, place, investigator and methodology. Using both qualitative and quantitative techniques – common in the cognitive and social sciences – we evaluate evidence in search of a consistent pattern across a number of different "data points."

- **Materials Review**ⁱⁱⁱ

FrameWorks collected and analyzed more than 150 press releases, more than three dozen public speeches given by national officers of the teachers’ unions themselves, as well as miscellaneous printed materials supplied by these organizations. The materials collected span the course of an entire year – January 1, 2009, to January 1, 2010.

- **Expert Interviews**^{iv}

To locate “experts” on unions, and teachers’ unions more specifically, FrameWorks compiled initial lists of both academic experts and key practitioners working in education. We conducted a total of 12 one-on-one “expert” interviews, both in person and over the telephone, in March and April 2009.

- **Cultural Models Interviews**^v

In addition to these expert interviews, we conducted 20 in-depth cultural models interviews with Americans in Dallas, Texas, and Philadelphia, Pa. Informants were selected to represent variation along the domains of ethnicity, gender, age, educational background and political ideology (as self-reported during the screening process).

- **Media Analysis**^{vi}

Building on an earlier media analysis^{vii} that included coverage of teachers and teachers’ unions, FrameWorks conducted a more detailed analysis of the media’s coverage of teachers’ unions in a review of 518 articles collected from May 1, 2009, to April 30, 2010. During this year, media that dealt with the issue of teachers’ unions were collected from newspapers, national radio and national news broadcasts across the country. Articles were drawn from newspapers in the

following cities: Detroit, Los Angeles, New York, Washington, D.C., Boston, Atlanta, Chicago, Cleveland, Milwaukee, Houston, Miami, Denver, San Francisco and Seattle.^{viii} The sample also included transcripts from national newscasts from ABC, CBS, MSNBC, CNN and Fox News Network, as well as transcripts from National Public Radio news broadcasts.^{ix}

- **Peer Discourse Sessions^x**

Six Peer Discourse Sessions were conducted in July 2010 with a total of 72 Americans, organized in groups of 11 to 13 participants in three cities: Memphis, Tenn.; Minneapolis, Minn.; and Pittsburgh, Penn. The groups were formed as follows: one white group, one African-American group, one Latino group, one high-education group (some college experience), one low-education group (high school diploma or less), and one mixed-education group.

- **Simplifying Models^{xi}**

To address the specific gaps in understanding documented in the above research, FrameWorks developed a total of eight candidate metaphors and tested them in December 2010 in two locations (Baltimore, Maryland, and Portland, Maine), comprising a data set of 48 10-minute interviews. Then, in March 2011, FrameWorks conducted a survey with approximately 2,000 participants, which measured the performance in relation to a set of outcome measures of six candidate simplifying models that emerged as effective from the earlier interviews. Finally, Persistence Trials were conducted with 18 participants in Colorado and Maryland, observing 12 transmissions of the model.

- **Experimental Survey^{xii}**

A second online experimental survey was conducted in March 2011. This study included a sample of 2,400 registered U.S. voters, weighted on the basis of age, gender, education level and party identification to statistically represent all adult registered voters in the nation. Respondents were randomly exposed to one of five values before answering a set of questions designed to gauge support for progressive programs and policies as well as attitudes to education reform, teacher professional development and teachers' unions.

In all, this particular inquiry comprised 4,500 informants and 675 media and expert articles.

I. The Mental Landscape

The public has multiple mental pathways it pursues in attempting to understand the relationship between education reform, quality teaching, and teachers' unions. The task in this part of the report is to identify the routes that are the most well-worn, chronically accessible and "top of mind" for most Americans. These patterns were observed across the methods described above and point to the challenges advocates face in moving public will in a direction more in line with the policy agendas favored by reformers. This section documents this mental landscape in order to help education reformers understand what they are up against in attempting to reframe public thinking.

1. People do not have a clear understanding of the educational system, so the system becomes equated with what they can see: teachers.

“The solution to all of public education’s troubles seems to boil down to a refrain, says retired Montgomery teacher Jane Stern...: Blame it on the teacher who works her tail off for 14 hours a day.”

Michael Alison Chandler, “In NEA, Obama faces an enthusiasm gap,” The Washington Post, July 2, 2011, A1-4.

In general, Americans have a hard time seeing education as a system. To the extent that they can think about this system at all, it is reduced to an understanding that teachers *are* the system.

Here is what people had to say in our Cultural Models Interviews:

Interviewer: *What’s the relationship between a teacher and the school that they teach in, the school district that their school is in? What’s the teacher’s relationship to other parts of the education system? Do you understand my question?*

Informant: *No.*

Interviewer: *There are different things that make up education other than just the teacher, right? So how does the teacher and all those other parts relate?*

Informant: *I think they all relate because they all are teachers first.*

The inability to conceive of and articulate the broader context in which educational reform occurs severely limits the capacity for systems thinking. Because teachers are seen as *being* the system, any failures in education are attributed to and solely focused on changing teachers' performance, which we will see below is seen to derive exclusively from their level of innate caring. On the other hand, this perspective conceals the factors beyond the teacher-student dyad that shape learning outcomes, such as appropriate resources and supports, access to the latest innovations around teaching quality, and the capacity to effectively bring technology and student learning together in a way that allows people to see that reform requires paying attention to multiple parts of the educational process. To achieve practical reforms consistent with experts' views, people need to better understand that the “system” is not some amorphous bureaucracy without utility but rather a network of multiple actors who should and can work together to produce quality educational experiences for America’s children.

This overall lack of understanding of the educational system makes it terribly difficult for people to productively situate teachers, and hence teachers’ unions, in the context of broader education reform efforts. In other words, teachers are understood as being the educational system. Ipso facto, if the system is broken, the solution is to fix the teacher. The inability to conceive of the educational system more broadly results in a reductionist equation of quality education as just being about teachers:

Interviewer: *How do you think we can improve the education system?*

Informant: *Well, we have to hold teachers accountable by making sure that our teachers*

are teaching their students properly. We have to hold them accountable, that they are in control of their classroom, and of course, that they are there every day so the kids won't have to deal with substitute teachers. And [we have to be sure] that this is something that they really want to do, and that they are concerned about the students, that they want to make sure that their children are educated.

Cultural Models Interviews

2. Given that people do not have a productive working understanding of the educational system, it is not surprising that they have trouble seeing what the reform of this system might look like and, thus, focus on the small picture – teacher characteristics – or recoil from the large picture – the perceived unattainable cost of reform.

As in Frameworks' broader research on education reform, the extant work confirms that people don't have a productive working understanding of the concept of reform. This, of course, largely turns on the fact that people do not have a very good understanding of what constitutes the educational system. Our research shows that people either perceive the system through a tunnel-vision focus on one of its many parts (teachers), or that they see it as some large, abstract, undifferentiated mass. From these perspectives of the education system, thinking about reform is either hyper-specific—make teachers care more—or impossibly vague—fix a system without definition or parameter. As one informant in our peer discourse sessions^{xiii} said:

You know, I just think of the word "reform," right? "Re" — "form." We got to form it in the first place. We're not gonna reform any stuff that isn't even formed in the first place. I think to reform something that is this amorphous blob out there called ... the "education system." [SIGH]

Peer Discourse Sessions, Pittsburgh Mixed Education

Given the general volatility of the times in which we live, people are rightly skeptical of comprehensive changes. The debate over national healthcare reform is Exhibit A in this instance. On the one hand, people can (and do) recognize that the system is broken; but on the other they are fearful and suspicious, and unable to imagine what radical change to the system that they all have direct experience with would look like. The upshot is that, to many people the "system" centers on teachers and extends merely to parents and students, all of whom are viewed to require "caring" and motivation to make the system work better.

One interesting observation from the qualitative interviews and group discussions is just how difficult it is for people to identify players other than the student-parent-teacher troika. For example, Americans do not immediately recognize a role for school districts, state education administrators and the federal government in the educational process and when they do, they are confused about what roles these groups play in the system. If they can't identify the relevant actors and the functions they perform, it is highly unlikely they can sustain reform thinking which requires taking into account multiple actors across jurisdictions. In the end it becomes cognitively easier to fall back on readily accessible cultural models that provide what, in the minds of Americans, are reasonable and logical ways of considering the education system and its reform. Unfortunately, these "comfortable" understandings lead to a few narrow ways of

thinking about improving education and do not create receptivity to progressive reform of the system.

FrameWorks' research shows exactly this.^{xiv} After fixing teachers, by making them more caring and motivated, informants then fell back on a deep consumerist American cultural model to think about change – turning to considerations of costs and money. Operating in consumerist mode, people thought fixing the system would simply take far more money than we could spend. In other words, they saw reform as prohibitively expensive.

Americans also saw the future backwards. That is, in thinking about solutions to education issues, informants employed a dominant American assumption of the rosy and utopian “good old days” and advocated a move “back to the basics.” This anachronistic and anti-innovation idea was seen as important in improving education and as affordable, as well as closely related to the motivational problems (caring, effort) documented above.

Once the above perspectives had been exhausted, informants resorted to a “more computers” solution with little thought given to whether or not teachers are properly trained to use technology in the classroom or if digital learning actually improves learning outcomes. In short, even when people think about reform, it is in a very limited way that conceals many of the widely recognized components associated with improving teaching and learning.

3. People have a narrow view of teachers, one that conceals the resources necessary for professional development, and in turn, high quality student learning.

Our research evidences a very strong American cultural model of teachers – as innately caring nurturers answering a higher calling. Furthermore, our research shows that this highly dominant way of thinking makes it difficult to see teachers as professionals supported by a network of external resources. As such, the teaching profession is about finding individuals who care enough to “go the extra mile” to motivate students who are difficult and distracted. FrameWorks’ Informants expressed it in these terms:

***Interviewer:** Why do we still have people that are willing to become teachers then?*

***Informant:** It’s a labor of love. They just love kids and they want to make a difference in society. In their heart, they’re compassionate. It’s a labor of love.*

You’ve got to have a desire to want to teach. I think it’s something very intrinsic. You’ve got to have the love for the job. I’ve met teachers who are there because it’s a paycheck, because it’s what they got their degree in ... but I think those are the marginal ones, but then you get the people, and you can tell, who love their job, they love the kids.

***Informant:** This guy was passionate about his teaching. I think there should be more passion. If someone likes doing their job and they are passionate about it, you’re going to listen a lot more to passion than you are with some guy just sitting up there saying, “turn*

to page 17, read this, what do you think, etc.”

Cultural Models Interviews

Attributing the success of teachers to inherent human traits conceals a wide range of external factors that account for teacher development and success. For example, this assumption omits such things as teacher recruitment, content knowledge, professional development and other competencies that result from teacher professionalism. Understanding teaching as an avocation instead of a profession means that the unit of analysis – the level on which people focus – is the individual, not the system. Reform, in these terms, involves making teachers "care more" or identifying new teachers who have more passion than the tired, bored, and inert workforce that teachers' unions are seen as trying to protect. Any conversation about reforming the system, therefore, is by definition a call to "fix" teachers and fix them in a specific way – make them care more or find others that will. It is small wonder, then, that teachers and their unions are scapegoats in the national reform conversation.

4. Teachers' unions are perceived to be self-interested and exclusively concerned with increasing teacher pay and benefits – even if it means protecting bad teachers. As a result they are seen as trying to protect the status quo against reform.

For Americans, the most accessible view of teachers' unions is that they are primarily interested in improving the individual material interests of their constituents. This is directly at odds with the notion that teachers are compassionate and committed people who are unselfishly motivated to care deeply about the well-being of children. People perceive this dichotomy to be a zero-sum game in which teachers' interests – as represented by the unions – are at odds with students' interests (which are understood as a function of the teacher quality=teacher caring equation). Put differently, individual interests are understood as being in conflict with collective interests.

When people were asked to think about unions generally, and teachers' unions in particular, they quickly pointed to the seemingly exclusive concerns of unions with teacher pay and benefits; the corrupting influence of politics, money and power; and the advantages of "pure capitalism" unfettered by union influence:

I think that unions are constantly looking at, as all politicians are, looking at the “money” aspect. They’re not looking at, necessarily, completely, what is best for the child. So, as a result, they have a lot of, as you all said, “political pull,” “political power,” so they look at what’s gonna benefit “moneywise” for their union and their teachers, and they push for that whether the teachers want it or not because they’re looking at the “money” aspect.

Peer Discourse Sessions, Pittsburgh Mixed Education

I believe that a lot of these unions are supporting teachers that should be out of the whole school system, and they have allowed for these teachers to get away with a lot of things.

Peer Discourse Sessions, Pittsburgh Latino

Interviewer: *Do you think things would be different, if we’d never had unions?*

Informant: *We might still be the leading manufacturer of automobiles! If we didn't have unions, airfares might not be so expensive. I have some friends who are pilots, and their salaries are outrageous because they lobby a lot. Yeah, some goods would be cheaper because it'd be cheaper to make them*

Cultural Models Interviews

Participant 1: *Well, just I think, general, but as we're talking with teachers' unions, yeah, I think sometimes they lose sight, and maybe their little power gets too much, and they push.*

Participant 2: *I think any group, you get too many people involved, and then you get people elected to be the voice of that group, then you have a chance of losing your focus. You forget what it's really about. Is it about the teachers? Is it about the students? Is it about the people who were just on a power trip? I mean, it could be like with any group of people.*

Peer Discourse Sessions, Memphis White Group

Another piece of the union narrative is the idea that they frequently obstruct reform efforts. Far from advocating for innovation and progress, the unions are perceived to be guardians of the status quo at the expense of quality student experiences. As one participant in our peer discourse sessions put it:

They're going to fight each other. The teachers' unions are what unions are. They will fight for the status quo every time. They will fight to protect their members. That's what they're meant to do. That's what unions do. However, "education reform" is completely against the status quo. Any reform is against the status quo. Just by definition alone, they counteract each other.

Peer Discourse Sessions, Minneapolis High Education

This view is routinely supported by media coverage. FrameWorks' media content analyses demonstrate that the *unions as obstructionist* trope is commonplace:

STEVE PERRY, CNN EDUCATION CONTRIBUTOR: What teachers' unions do is they stand in the way of progress. And one of the places where progress needs to take place is we need to allow there to be a collegial relationship between the teacher and the principal, and they create what is a valued relationship. And we begin to determine their effectiveness based upon the data that appears in the classroom, and the only data that matters is the students' performance (Is merit pay for teachers a viable idea? CNN Newsroom, February 17, 2010).

Both national teachers' unions oppose the use of student testing data to evaluate individual teachers, arguing in part that students are often taught by several teachers and that teacher evaluations should be based on several measures of performance, not just test scores. "This is poking teachers' unions straight in the eye," Mike Petrilli, a vice president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a research group that studies education policy, said of the proposed fund eligibility requirement dealing with student data

(Administration takes aim at state laws on teachers, The New York Times, by Sam Dillon, Section A; National Desk; Pg. 15, July 24, 2009).

The primary tension turns on the fact that teachers are understood to be motivated by altruism, while unions by self-interest. This conflict, together with what FrameWorks' researchers have termed the "*mutual exclusivity of motivation*,"^{xv} creates a major perceptual problem in thinking about a productive role for teachers' unions. Employing the *mutual exclusivity of motivation* assumption, Americans tacitly assume that people cannot be motivated by caring and money. To the extent that the unions represent the money side of the equation, they are put in direct conflict with the much-valued compassion motivation of teachers. The end result is that the conversation becomes about motivation and not context. Put differently, it is difficult to get to a conversation about the contextual determinants of educational outcomes when people are focused on competing motivations for teachers.

In sum, the mental landscape for public thinking about the educational system, educational reform, quality teaching and teachers' unions has four key features:

- **People have a very limited understanding of the ecology of the educational system, so they focus on teachers.**
- **People have a limited and distorted conception of educational reform, so they focus on fixing teachers.**
- **Quality teaching is understood as derived from an individual's self-sacrificial caring, so fixing caring is equated with education reform.**
- **Teachers' unions are seen as obstructing educational quality and improvement, with an especially strong emphasis on job protection and seniority, so they are perceived as oppositional to teacher caring and thus to education reform.**

We can now appreciate the cogency and appeal of this tightly woven narrative that resists complexity in favor of a series of simplistic equations.

The communications challenge is further complicated by the fact that many reformers *enter* the public conversation talking about the role of teachers' unions. Our research indicates that this is not a promising strategy. Why? First and foremost, because it does not effectively counter the logic enumerated above. Rather than disrupting the narrative and all the assumptions that underlie it, it assumes that people can "fill in" the missing information – the education system, the goals of reform, the role of teachers, etc. Would that it were that easy! Moreover, this "cut to the chase" approach heightens the rhetorical tone, encourages teacher-centric – as opposed to system level – reforms, conceals the wide array of contextual factors that account for quality learning, and makes it extremely difficult to positively situate teachers' unions in the reform debate.

In the next section, we take up the question of how to more effectively frame the public conversation about education reform in a way that allows advocates to pivot to a discussion of teachers' unions as a potentially positive factor in reform efforts. To foreshadow, our analysis works on the assumption that it is not effective to build a communications strategy on a

straightforward platform of convincing people about the utility of teachers' unions. Our approach relies on a more indirect way of talking about teachers' unions; a way that is based on the vernacular expression "get in where you fit in." In other words, the following analysis demonstrates how advocates can get teachers' unions into the public conversation about reform in a place that will seem more logical to the public because it positions the unions in relation to an expanded educational context where they are clearly on the right side of reform.

II. Redirections

The dominant cultural understanding of the role that teachers' unions play in the national conversation on education reform is clear: they are seen as self-interested organizations out to protect and increase their members' pay and benefits to the detriment of meaningful education reform. Far from being a deal-maker in positive reform efforts, unions are seen as deal-breakers, obstructing new and innovative solutions, shielding bad teachers from review, and defending the status quo. Moreover, this assignment of an obstructionist role for teachers' unions has profound consequences for education reform more generally, as teachers' unions provide an easy-to-think "bad guy" in the heretofore fuzzy narrative about what prevents real reform from taking place. By providing the missing link in the narrative, all the other pieces fall into place – the problem with education reform is teachers, the problem with teachers is caring, and the obstacle to caring is pay and benefits, promoted by teachers' unions. Lost in the process is any consideration for how and where learning takes place, what professional development and systemic reforms contribute to enhanced learning outcomes, and what can be done through policies and programs to better position the country for the 21st century. Unless the dominant narrative is disrupted, there is little chance that these questions will be seriously considered in public discourse.

So, how do we move the conversation in a more effective direction? From a communications perspective, the answer is to redirect the conversation away from dominant patterns of thinking towards other, more fruitful communications frameworks that help people find a space for teachers' unions in their understanding of education reform. Our approach is built on three assumptions derived from the research literature:

- Because Americans cannot see what is at stake in education reform beyond the narrow interaction of individual students and teachers, you must contextual the conversation by introducing a broader value proposition. This begins to build a more ecological view of the system therefore making reform easier to comprehend and weaning them from a "little picture" obsession with character and motivation;
- To get people to appreciate a different set of changes to the educational system, you must provide them with cognitive "help" in the form of metaphors, or what FrameWorks calls simplifying models. On the one hand, these models can build on the values frame by helping people think about reform in a more expansive, detailed and substantive fashion. On the other hand, by providing a more concrete understanding of what is needed to accomplish reform, it becomes possible to carve out a productive role for teachers' unions.
- You must "professionalize" teachers to get people to see that there are external resources that improve quality education. Teachers must be perceived as part of an educational "network" that includes a variety of actors all committed to achieving quality educational outcomes. This allows advocates to connect teachers to teachers' unions in ways that are not limited to pay and benefits, but recognize their expertise and necessary contribution to meaningful reform.

1. Set up the values proposition as a way to frame the contextual elements of education reform.

A core component of FrameWorks’ prescriptive approach to building public support for social issues is the concept of values. As the research literature demonstrates, values serve a key role as central organizing principles in people’s decisional calculus on social issues. How social issues are aligned with specific values, therefore, significantly impacts how people think about social problems in terms of causes of and solutions to social problems. So, to redirect the conversation, one has to reorient the value proposition in a direction more conducive to one’s policy agenda.

FrameWorks researchers tested several values to determine alternatives to the dominant understandings associated with the role that teachers’ unions play in education reform. Some of these values have proven effective in our examination of broader education reform efforts^{xvi}; others are original to this project. In the case of teachers’ unions, our research shows clearly that the value statement must move away from the corrosive entailments of self-interest – unions as the “villain” in education reform. Instead, value propositions must position teachers’ unions as a central and important player in reform efforts. One key value has emerged from our qualitative and quantitative inquiries as having the redirective power to accomplish this task.

Pragmatism

FrameWorks research has shown the effectiveness of the value of Pragmatism in reframing education debates in a way that creates space for a role for teachers’ unions in reform. The underlying assumption is that this value has a healthy dose of the American “can do” spirit to it – a spirit that says that, when we have important problems to solve, we leave our egos (interests) at the door, roll up our sleeves, and get to the business at hand. We tested Pragmatism in the experimental survey phase of our work to isolate the effects on exposure to the value on attitudes about teachers’ unions, educational reform, and educational outcomes.^{xvii}

The central finding from the experimental study is that *Pragmatism* has a strong, positive effect on attitudes about teachers’ unions, educational outcomes, and educational reform policies.

The Pragmatism value enhances attitudes to teachers’ unions. For example, exposure to the Pragmatism prime is associated with a statistically significant increase of almost 4% in favorable attitudes toward teachers’ unions (holding other things constant such as age, class, race, religion, etc.). This has important substantive implications. Increasing levels of favorability of teachers’ unions is the first step in repositioning unions in the context of a reform conversation. Entering the conversation with a value that activates positive sentiments towards unions serves to countervail the expectation that unions are exclusively interested in pay and benefits. This value therefore is an effective way to create space for a discussion of the role of teachers’ unions in education reform – without having to lead with teachers’ unions and cue all of the dominant and more unproductive associations described in the previous section.

The Pragmatism value enhances support for government. An important side benefit of the Pragmatism value is the positive effect it has on how people think about of the scope of

government. Exposure to the *Pragmatism* value is associated with a more than 3% shift in a progressive direction regarding government activity. This is especially important, given that progressive education reform will surely require a significant role for government action. Finding a way to get people to understand that there is a rational approach to identifying a system, making it work and isolating the places where it needs fixing helps to reshape the view that the system is some faceless, nameless bureaucracy; hard to change, hard to reform.

The Pragmatism value avoids hyper partisanized rhetoric. Another advantage of opening the conversation with a broad-based value proposition is that it allows for a more *reasonable* public dialogue. One reason for this is that it immediately ratchets down the partisan tone that exemplifies much of the debate on education reform. For example, modern American media, such that it is, quickly zooms in on the contentious instances in the reform debate. It uses metaphors such as “war” and “conflict” to account for the dynamics of education reform. The following quote is typical of this kind of coverage:

With New York City schools planning for up to 8,500 layoffs, new teachers like Mr. Borock, and half a dozen others at his school, could be some of the ones most likely to be let go. That has led the school’s chancellor, Joel I. Klein, into a high-stakes battle with the teachers’ union to overturn seniority rules that have been in place for decades. Facing the likelihood of the largest number of layoffs in more than a generation, Mr. Klein and his counterparts around the country say that the rules, which require that the most recently hired teachers be the first to lose their jobs, are anachronistic. In an era of accountability, they say, the rules will upend their efforts of the last few years to recruit new teachers, improve teacher performance and reward those who do best (With teacher layoffs coming, battle turns to seniority rules, The New York Times, by Jennifer Medina, Section A; Metropolitan Desk; Pg. 1, April 25, 2010).

The Pragmatism value is easy to insert into ongoing public dialogue. Heading off this type of conversation is critically important to assigning a productive role for teachers’ unions in the public conversation about education reform. One way to do this is by starting the dialogue with a discussion of the core American value of Pragmatism. This value helps thinking by: (i) introducing a reasonable tone; (ii) identifying multiple players and assigning them “mature” roles in the reform process; (iii) establishing a powerful sense of multiple parties working towards a common goal; and (iv) finding a positive way to get teachers’ unions into the discussion. To the contrary, beginning the public conversation on contentious and narrowing grounds – such as teacher pay and benefits – directly leads to a rhetorical tone, the hardening of positions, and the sense that teachers’ unions are part of the problem, not the solution. In all this makes having robust public discourse difficult. Elucidating the value proposition as an opener, therefore, makes empirical and strategic sense.

2. Simplifying models can bring teachers’ unions into the public conversation on education reform and on the side of meaningful reform.

A central goal of FrameWorks’ strategy is to develop communications tools that aid people in alternative ways of thinking about social problems. One of the key pieces in the FrameWorks’ analytic toolbox is *simplifying models*.^{xviii} The basic concept is that people need cognitive help

in understanding complex systems. Put differently, the purpose of simplifying models is to represent a complex expert or scientific phenomenon through a concrete and relatable analogy that captures and models certain fundamental aspects of the expert concept. Using metaphor as a translational tool allows communicators to bridge gaps between *expert* understanding and *public* understanding and in so doing make science and expert information more readily accessible to the public as they think about public policy issues.

Research has shown that simple metaphors have the power to reveal multiple, interconnected – and often moving – parts of a complex problem or system in an elegant way (that is, simple and powerful).^{xix} FrameWorks has created a novel way to develop and test simplifying models that allows us to concretize complex phenomena – such as the educational system – into more readily available metaphors that help people see how something can or does work.^{xx}

In the one-on-one Cultural Models Interviews associated with this inquiry, we found that people had a hard time conceiving the idea of education reform. They understood it to be amorphous, abstract, and undifferentiated in a way that rendered it meaningless as a cognitive aid. Moreover, because media frames emphasize the intractability of the problem, the public is often skeptical about workable solutions and alternatives. In this vein, education reform is seen as too complicated and too big to address. In turn, people are not very receptive to listening to proposals that advance education reform policies and programs. This situation is, then, an invitation to default to the highly available and concrete actor of the teacher.

The goal in developing and testing simplifying models is to find framing tools that can accomplish two things: 1) get people to understand the educational system in a way that makes it easier to determine when and why it needs reform and to consider an array of actors and factors that need to be aligned; 2) creates a platform to interject teachers' unions into the conversation. Specifically, we discuss two simplifying models that show promise: *Remodeling* and *Scaffolding*. The *Remodeling* metaphor comes from prior FrameWorks research on the broader question of education reform.^{xxi} Scaffolding was developed specifically to get teachers' unions into the conversation.

Remodeling

We identified the model of *Remodeling* to explain in highly vivid and concrete terms the process of reform and the specific roles of various actors, including teachers' unions. The basic idea is to conjure thinking about how one goes about remodeling a house. So, you do more than simply repaint or change the doorknobs. Rather, you make substantial changes by updating old parts and making the house more modern and efficient. In this case, the house is the educational system. Remodeling implies you don't start from scratch and build a new house; instead you keep what is in good working order and repair or replace the things that are broken and inefficient. Granted, the changes you do implement will cause some temporary inconvenience (e.g., dust, noise, etc.) but the finished product is something that improves the quality of your life. Similarly, remodeling the educational system will ultimately lead to a better quality of education for our nation's youth.

When the concept of remodeling was introduced in on-the-street interviews, people were quickly able to apply it to the educational system. It allowed people to understand that the

system is fixable and gave them a way to understand and talk about the system as a whole, engaging them in considering and discussing practical solutions.

***Informant:** “I think that it [the education system] needs to be remodeled, but when you totally remodel a building, you tear down walls. Maybe not the outside structures but the inside structures. You actually go in, and you say, okay, is this a bearing wall? Is this something I truly need in this house? Okay, I truly need to teach my children conjunctions, and adjectives, and I need to teach them math; I need to teach them science; I need to teach them basics. Those are the bearing walls of education. But [the question is] “how” I teach it to them. We need to look outside of our education system, and say, “how does this child learn”? What’s the best way for this child to learn? Maybe the best way for this child to learn is through music. Maybe the best way for this child to learn is by touching things, and hands on. So you would have to tear down walls.”*
Cultural Models Interviews

In the Persistence Trials phase of the simplifying models research, the Remodeling metaphor helped informants think through a planned, specific, and tangible process of change that is forward-looking without being so large as to seem unrealistic

***Interviewer:** So how would you explain to someone what education reform is?*

***Participant:** “You have to look at the whole picture and see what needs to be updated, changed, and what is maybe outdated, and [needs to be] removed. I would say that it might make sense to step back and assess what it is, and where it is now, and where we want to go with it because a lot of things change over time, and if the system was designed at some point in the past that doesn’t really respond 100% to the way society is structured now; then that’s gonna cause problems, inefficiencies, and whatnot. So, I would say that one of the things that would make sense is to figure out how that system fits into what’s happening now, and what’s gonna be happening tomorrow. But I think it’s better to work on something that already exists than start from scratch. Like, if you were remodeling a house, it’s better to do something that already exists than try to build it from scratch.”*
Persistence Trials

This type of thinking offers a natural pivot point for talking about the role of teachers’ unions in the reform process. While it doesn’t get us all the way there, it sets the stage for developing a conversation that situates teachers’ unions as one of the key players in reform efforts. In this way, concretizing a process of reform can be seen to be a necessary step to set up and create room for a productive role for teachers’ unions in this process. It puts teachers’ unions on the right side of reform and of progress more generally, and counters the perception that they are moving the system backward. In this setup, teachers’ unions can help us assess the system and needed reforms because they are a repository of shared teacher experiences and practices. They know what works and what doesn’t. This also has the advantage of releasing teachers from their central place in dominant understandings of reform. After being exposed to the remodeling idea,

FrameWorks' study participants did not talk about having to fix teachers. Instead, they talked about the whole system and process. This is a significant improvement over the more accessible ways of thinking about the system and reform efforts which devolve quickly and problematically to the motivations of individual teachers.

Scaffolding

Once a more productive sense of reform had been created, our task was to find a place for teachers' unions to enter the conversation. To accomplish this task, we developed the model of *Scaffolding* to help people think about the kinds of supports, resources, and systems that need to be in place for successful education reform to occur. This conceptual platform was built on the assumption that the best way to get teachers' unions into the conversation was by indirection. In other words, the goal was to create the pre-conditions in public thinking that would allow people to catapult over their pejorative attitudes about teachers' unions. The model places teachers in a broader systemic context by providing people with the cognitive tools to reason about the many things that make teachers successful.

The basic idea of scaffolding is that quality education requires teachers to be connected to a network of resources in the same way that the scaffolding builders use is critical in helping them do their jobs – giving them access to resources, supports and connections to other builders. As construction workers build buildings, teachers build knowledge. To do a good job, therefore, teachers need a network that allows them to share information, innovations, best practices, and crucial materials. The quality of the scaffolding – the supports – is crucial for contractors to construct a good building. Likewise, teachers need reliable scaffolding – things like continuing education, the right equipment, and experienced feedback. Teacher effectiveness, therefore, is a function of the quality of the scaffolding that supports their work.

Study participants readily used this metaphor to understand teaching and the educational process. **After exposure to the *Scaffolding* prime, people were able to quickly identify the larger system and understand the multiple supports that are necessary for quality teaching. In addition, the simplifying model was effective in forestalling default patterns of thinking.**

Moderator: So how would you describe the scaffolding technique?

Participant: When you think of scaffolding, it is a support; it's a system like, everything working together. When it breaks down, like the training and continuing education, we all know that they need that, but I never looked at it like the definite support for the teachers to do what they do.

Participant: If I'm a teacher, those are the most important things, technology, community leadership, funding, school, resources, that are gonna make or break me as a teacher. Is that fair to say? Is there anything that's missing?

Persistence Trials

More to the point, we hypothesized that indirection of this sort would create a space for teachers' unions to be brought into the conversation. In fact, people spontaneously, and without prompting, included teachers' unions in education reform solutions:

Participant 1: *The stuff I see, continuing education, the bigger picture is you're trying to unionize a lot of this stuff. Which is not bad, it's not good. But I...and I think a lot of it too has to do with money....I'm just glad there's somebody's actually trying to solve problems and right now there's a lot of problems.*

Moderator: *You had said something before about unionizing, I wanted to ask you about that.*

Participant 1: *It just, it seems like you're trying to streamline. I don't know if there are teachers' unions or not.*

Moderator: *Ask her [pointing to Participant 2, who had teachers in her family].*

Participant 1: *No, I could just see trying to streamline how things are taught, or deal with wages, which I think is good. Something about a union just shot in my brain.*
Persistence Trials

One of the most noteworthy things about this simplifying model is that, after exposure, people did not raise any of the negative characterizations of teachers or teachers' unions: that teacher caring is the key, that teachers are the education system, that unions are *only* concerned with pay and benefits or that they are rife with the corrupting influence of money, politics, and power. Instead *Scaffolding* generated thinking about the multitude of individuals, institutions, and roles that exist in the education system.

Persistence Trials Participant 1, alone to Participant 2: *One thing I'm thinking about right away. The scaffolding is used to build a main structure. Scaffolding is temporary, but it's a behind the scenes – these are all behind the scenes – when the teacher's teaching, you don't see those funding, technology, community leadership, in the classroom. But it's there feeding those people.*

In short, *Scaffolding* makes the education system – and the needs of teachers – easier to think and it creates positive space for teachers' unions in that system. It leads people to talk about the need to place teachers in a supportive external network that provides them with the tools and methods to produce high-quality education; and, it induces people to place teachers' unions as a vital component in that network.

The idea that effective framing can help people imagine a broader and richer role for teachers' unions is substantiated by findings from our *Peer Discourse Sessions*. In particular, we charged certain groups of study participants (in the *Negotiation* part of the sessions) to advocate for the inclusion of teachers' unions in the reform process. The basic finding is that people were able to situate teachers' unions in a role that highlighted the unions' knowledge of the most effective teaching practices, their function as a repository of teacher "know-how," and the fact that they can act as data collectors:

Participant: “On the union, you’re gonna have the most qualified, the most experienced, the people that are gonna know the most. The people in the union, they work on a national level. They know what works and what doesn’t. They know what other cities[are doing] ...things that don’t work for them up North, wherever, among your different states.”

- Peer Discourse Sessions, Memphis White Group

Participant: “Unions should have a position at the table because the union provides an effective middle man, effective almost daily clearinghouse, so to speak, you have so many different teachers, they all have so many different experiences, you can’t just have this mob of people screaming out their ideas. We need to be able to collect the data, we need to be able to present the data, we need to be able to evaluate what works, to monitor feedback from them. They’re the ones that are on the front lines.”

- Peer Discourse Sessions, Pittsburgh Low Education

Strategic Takeaways

There are three core strategic lessons to be learned from this portion of our work. They are meant to serve as guiding principles as advocates think about developing communications strategies around education reform, teacher quality, and teachers’ unions. Each is necessary but alone is not sufficient to effectively situation teachers’ unions in the broader public conversation on education reform. Failure to pay attention to these points is likely to result in public thinking that quickly and predictably defaults to the unproductive patterns of thinking that will ultimately work against moving public will in the desired direction.

- ❖ **Order Matters.** One of the most important, but often hardest to learn communications principles, is that how the public conversation is *ordered* has a profound effect on the way people think about an issue.^{xxii} In the context of teachers’ unions, the question is not whether you talk about unions or not; rather, it is a question of *when* you talk about unions. FrameWorks’ research convincingly demonstrates that public thinking about teachers’ unions is characterized by a set of negative entailments – for example, unions protect bad teachers, only care about teacher pay and benefits and work against the larger interests of students and the education system. Beginning the conversation with information about teachers’ unions, therefore, activates the negative entailments and leads to default patterns of thinking that work against moving public will in the desired direction.

It is precisely because people do not understand how the educational system works that they must be first inculcated with a values proposition that helps them cognitively identify and situate a range of actors that are responsible for educational outcomes. Values such as Pragmatism do just that. They provide people with a reasonable and actionable sensibility about how reform can proceed. The value also ratchets down the rhetorical tone of the debate and gets people to think in a more rational and orderly way.

Once the value has been “set,” advocates should introduce a way for people to understand reform. In this instance, *Remodeling* allows people to see that the problem is indeed manageable – a perspective which leverages and builds on the value of pragmatism by creating a coherent and concrete “it can be done” message. Remodeling helps people understand that the entire system does not need to be dismantled. Much like remodeling a house, you keep the things that work and update and replace the things that don’t. In this way people begin to see, not only how the system can be reformed, but that it *can* be.

- ❖ **Indirection Works Best.** In addition to *when* you talk about unions being a critical consideration, *how* communications discuss unions is of vital importance. The simplifying model of *Scaffolding* provides people with the requisite cognitive tools to understand that teacher quality can only be achieved when the proper supports are in place. Continuing the construction metaphor, just as building a structure requires the proper scaffolding to support a quality finished product; teachers’ unions provide teachers with the appropriate tools and supports that are required to build knowledge. This creates the opportunity to fit teachers’ unions into the discussion about education reform. And again, the scaffolding benefits from a metaphorical consonance with the idea of remodeling. The result is dramatically different from what would be achieved if communicators launched baldly into a discussion of the benefits of teachers’ unions for education reform.
- ❖ **Expand the understanding of what teachers’ unions can do.** We have also found that it is important to make clear the kinds of contributions unions make to teacher expertise. In this case, talking about unions as the repository of knowledge and best practices has proven useful. Teachers’ unions have the capacity to take quality education to scale because they have the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of teachers across jurisdictions. When this assignment of function has been done properly, people can volunteer an appropriate role for unions in reform efforts and, interestingly, they tend not to fall back on default patterns of thinking.

Now if all of this sounds daunting, it isn’t. Smart leaders have already intuited the importance of many of these principles. The following excerpt from a union is an example of heading in the right direction:

“If we are going to bridge the divide, we’ve got to look at the entire problem and include everyone in strategizing a solution. ‘I firmly believe that until we start to look at transforming the entire system and stop looking for tactical quick fixes, we will continue to fail to deliver for our students. The way forward requires us to look at what is working and adopt those best practices throughout the system. When it comes to students, we’ve got to invest time and resources in capturing their minds early and continuing to engage them throughout their lifetime. Regarding teachers, we must focus on the profession of teaching as a whole and invest in professional development and training throughout their careers.”

“NEA applauds efforts to quantify education achievement gaps” National Education of Association. April 22, 2009.

The only things missing from this communiqué are: 1) the introduction of a values proposition at the top of the paragraph to guard against defaulting to a belief that the system *is* teachers; 2) the use of simplifying models to help concretize reform to guard against the belief that the problem is too big and to create a role for unions in this system; and 3) the explicit connection to teachers' unions as a source of professionalization for teacher quality to guard against the belief that unions are only concerned with material benefits (granted, because it comes from the union, this last point is implicit; nonetheless, it is better to make things easy for the public). Still, this paragraph is a great start to communicating about education reform, teacher quality, and teachers' unions. It also demonstrates how easily the framing tools identified in this MessageMemo can be inserted in materials to deepen understanding.

III. Traps

In the following section, we review those aspects of public thinking about education that trigger models that may be “easy to think” but which trap public thinking in unproductive evaluations and judgments.

1. The “politics” trap

Running under the public’s understanding of education is a strong undertone of partisanship and common assumption of discord between groups. People’s understandings of unions feed into and support this underlying connection between education and party politics. When the atmosphere is charged by such partisanship and the public dialogue is full of attacks and critiques, the education issues are seen as inherently fraught with disagreement and people have a hard time seeing that there are actually solutions to debates. Therefore when communications, intentionally or unintentionally, step into the politics trap, it becomes difficult for people to see a productive role for the main actors because of the way these parts are deeply understood as having inherently separate and competing agendas – especially the unions. People had this to say:

But the unions are very political, too. I mean, if you belong to a union, they come in and they tell you who you have to vote for ... If they’re a Democratic union they’re probably gonna be for, if it’s a Republican they’re not gonna be for it.

- *Peer Discourse Sessions, Pittsburgh Mixed Education*

“It’s too political now. The school boards, you know, the unions ... you know? They look at it as like, Republicans and Democrats, Conservatives, and Left and Right Wing. They don’t look at it as, okay, let’s do what’s best for the people, do what’s best for the kids, do what’s best for the school; they look at it as, which side of the fence am I on, and that’s what they worry about.”

- *Peer Discourse Sessions, Pittsburgh Latino*

The end result of falling into this trap is that, once activated, this perspective about the relationship between parts of the system renders reform an unlikely proposition. It becomes difficult to assign productive roles to the various actors in the reform process and this difficulty

allows people to fall back on the more accessible and “easy to think” tropes about education reform. Put simply, people reason that, if education reform is a food fight between calcified political interests who are “fighting” for different sides, there is little likelihood that real reform will result. Charged words like “fight” and “war” only serve to activate this trap.

2. The "caring" trap

While it might seem a natural approach to the situation enumerated here, trying to prove that teachers do care is not an effective antidote to the dominant narrative. In fact, it backfires. It does so precisely because it puts all the attention back on the motivations of individual teachers and forces them to "prove worthiness" over and over again, teacher by teacher. Consider this news article that falls into this trap even as it attempts to argue for reconsideration of budget cuts affecting the classroom:

"...the national push for education reform has made teachers feel defensive and less respected. Principals point to the effect of the documentary 'Waiting for Superman,' which sharply criticizes U.S. public education and puts much of the responsibility on poor teachers and unions.

The message that teachers get is, 'You've let us down. Look where we are in the world right now, and it's your fault,' said a Maryland principal..."

Robert McCartney, "Budget cuts, falling prestige take a toll on teachers, The Washington Post, September 4, 2011, C1-4.

This emphasis on the right motivation and the respect required to "do the job" is unlikely to erode the notion that good teachers teach for the kids and don't require additional supports, including those provided by unions.

Moreover, this tendency to tell the story of successful people by harkening back to "the caring teacher" further reminds people of the distance between "the good old education" they received and the new, less dedicated version. In these stories, the bootstraps narrative is often repeated with the caring teacher as the lone facilitator of upward mobility. Even articulate advocates for social change fall into this trap when they "explain" educational outcomes through the narrow prism of the caring teacher.^{xxiii}

Finally, this "small picture" frame, in which tales are told of individual personalities to attempt to promote a broader generalization, does not have this effect. The individual story is more likely to serve as the exception that proves the rule, as a decade of social science research attests.^{xxiv} As might be expected, this testimony to the caring teacher then sets up an automatic contrast with the current version, in which stereotypes associated with the dominant narrative (self-interested, lazy, ill-prepared) explain the difference between educational outcomes.

In the end, the caring, charismatic teacher story is not the story you want. The networked teacher is what the reframed narrative needs.

3. The ideal v. real trap

Another low-hanging fruit that may appear promising to communicators is the implicit distinction that Americans draw between the way that things *should* be and the way that they *are*

in reality. FrameWorks has found this fundamental way of organizing information and thinking about social issues to be operative across many domains,^{xxv} but our research shows that it is particularly powerful in structuring the way that Americans think about education, education reform, teaching and, in particular, teachers' unions. While this pattern of thinking may appear a felicitous tool for drawing attention to the importance of and need for reform of a system that has drifted far away from its ideal function, our research has shown again and again that the activation of this fundamental model has unproductive effects in helping Americans think productively about and engage in policy and reform discussions.

When Americans employ this mental model, gaps between the ideal and the real are seen as natural, inherent and "just the way the world works." In other words, the model does *not* lead people to question the differences between ideal and real functions or to see the need to address the gaps between these domains, but instead the ideal v. real model cements notions that the real and the ideal exist at a fundamental and inherent distance from each other. This type of thinking, therefore leads people to a sense of hopelessness when it comes to solving social problems because it structures such social problems as an unavoidable and natural reality. This trap was evident in the discussions we observed:

Participant: "It says that teachers — "representing the views of teachers on education, and keeping professional improvements center stage," and it says, "what can be done to improve it," and the "deep knowledge of how education happens in the classroom" — might be true, but that's not what the union does. I mean, you said, the union doesn't do that.

Peer Discourse Sessions, Minneapolis High Education

The perceived gap between the ideal and the real leads to a kind of deterministic thinking that undermines moving public will on social issues. In this vein, people perceive social systems to be inherently flawed and naturally fraught with complex problems. As a result they exhibit less internal efficacy; that is, they feel they have little control over processes and outcomes. From a strategic point of view, this means that advocates must be careful to talk about the ways in which teachers' unions provide relevant educational supports in terms of knowledge, tools, and experience and how the provision of these supports improves the system in concrete and specific ways. Similarly, communicators must avoid appeals that trigger an assessment that the prescriptive role for teachers' unions in reform is desirable but beyond reach.^{xxvi} Using simplifying models like *Remodeling* and *Scaffolding*, then, helps communications avoid the ideal v. real trap and see positive change as possible and unions as a part of such improvements.

4. The crisis trap

Funders typically require nonprofits to submit a "problem statement" as part of any grant proposal. Advocates oftentimes take this as a challenge to identify their problem as being truly calamitous in size, scope, repercussion, etc. They use inflammatory adjectives like "enormous," "staggering", "calamitous" and "pathological" to describe the problem they intend to address. Again, such invocations constitute a trap from a strategic perspective – a trap that this research has found to be highly problematic but which communications never the less frequently fall into. Education advocates often operate under their own assumption that, if only the problem can be

demonstrated to be truly dire and urgent, reform and social change will inevitably result. The problem, however, is that, from a strategic view that focuses on the actual outcomes of messages rather than their intention, such communications dampen and impede rather than support and motivate great public support for reform policy. Americans already understand that the education system faces big and complex problems and introducing crisis language only serves to confirm and amplify their existing views and shore up their suspicions that crises this big may well be too big, deep and complicated to solve. This is what people said in reviewing articles about education reform and teachers in our *Peer Discourse Sessions*:

Participant: *It says, "If we fail." We have failed. Sorry, we have. And they still don't tell me what they're gonna do. How are you gonna improve? What's your ideas? It's just saying "if we fail," well, we have failed for, say, 20 or 30 years doing this, but you're still not letting me know what areas you're gonna improve, how are you gonna do it, and what steps to take.*

- *Peer Discourse Sessions, Memphis White Group*

Participant: *I just want to know "how" exactly they're gonna do it? I mean, what are they really talking about? I mean, it's easy to say, yeah we know that; we know that we need a certain goal because our children being educated the proper way will definitely make a better future for everyone, but how are they gonna address that issue and actually do it?*

- *Peer Discourse Sessions, Pittsburgh Latino*

Invoking the crisis frame is strategically counterproductive in that it does not impart any new information; as a result, it does not provide people with the cognitive capacity to intuit or understand transformational change. Further, activating the crisis frame leads to what some people have termed "compassion fatigue". In other words, people are being bombarded with information about a new "crisis" almost daily. Natural disasters, war, homelessness, and disease are common features of daily newscasts. The emotional weight of being asked to contribute to and get involved with some cause or another leads people to throw their hands in the air and say - enough! They then typically send \$50 dollars to their local charity and divest themselves from the problem. This is not social change and does constitute the type of support through understanding that is required for successful education reform. Education reform advocates must, therefore, carefully avoid falling into the "crisis" trap as a means to convey the significance of their problem. Instead, it is much more productive to lead the conversation with a value like *Pragmatism*. This provides people with the cognitive clues to understand that the problem must be tackled but that it is possible to develop a sensible, step-by-step plan that has clear metrics and outcomes.

Conclusion

In order to reframe the public discourse, education reform advocates must understand the shape and logic of public thinking. As this pertains to teachers' unions, there is a tight logic tree that has developed and repeated over time. The role assigned to teachers' unions as villains in this narrative has consequences for both teachers' unions specifically and for education reform more generally. There is simply no way around this narrative without disrupting and re-engineering

significant parts of the logic: what is at stake, what constitute the actors in the system, how these actors can work together to achieve practical reforms and how they can and must enlist the support of teachers and the structures that support them. As a result of the research presented here, the structure of a new narrative is now evident. It remains for a field of earnest practitioners to make use of these new communications tools to help the public see what they see as they put forward practical solutions and needed reforms.

About FrameWorks Institute:

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

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ⁱ Kendall-Taylor, Nathaniel. (2010). *What's in all this talk about teachers? Understanding teachers' collective role in reform: Mapping the gaps between the expert and the public understandings of teachers' unions*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

ⁱⁱ Bales, Susan Nall. (2010). *Framing education reform: A FrameWorks MessageMemo*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

ⁱⁱⁱ Manuel, T., & Remington-Bell, T. (2010). *What's in all this talk about teachers? A summary review of the common narratives used by teachers' unions to articulate the importance of their role in education reform. A FrameWorks materials review report*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute. Confidential.

^{iv} Kendall-Taylor. *What's in all this talk about teachers?*

^v Ibid.

^{vi} O'Neil, M., & Morgan, P. (2011). *Painted in a corner: How the media frame teachers' unions and education reform*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

^{vii} Center for Media and Public Affairs, (2009). *Put Down Your Pencils Please: Media Coverage of Education Reform 2007 to 2008*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

^{viii} Cities were selected in consultation with the funders for geographic diversity.

^{ix} This media analysis built upon an earlier investigation in which FrameWorks researchers examined media coverage of the broader issue of education reform. This study examined 384 stories over a 14-month period, from June 1, 2007, through July 31, 2008. This time period included many months of the presidential primary campaign as well as a short-lived Congressional effort to reauthorize the No Child Left Behind school reform law. While these national events were part of the news coverage in most newspapers, local events and debates constituted the more

significant part of coverage. See Center for Media and Public Affairs, (2009). *Put down your pencils please: Media coverage of education reform 2007 to 2008*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

^x O'Neil, M. (2010). *Getting on the right side of change: How peer discourse sessions see the role of teachers' unions in education reform. A FrameWorks research report*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute. Confidential; and Manuel, T., & Remington-Bell, T. (2010).

^{xi} Erard, M. (2011). *Teacher support on the rise: Increasing support for teachers' unions through a simplifying model*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

^{xii} Simon, A. (2011). *Building support for teachers' unions: The role of values framing. A FrameWorks research report*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

^{xiii} O'Neil, *Getting on the right side of change*.

^{xiv} Bales, Susan Nall. (2010). *The proper attitude: Challenges in framing higher education reform. FrameWorks Message Memo*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

^{xv} Kendall-Taylor, Nathaniel. (2010). *What's in all this talk about teachers? Understanding teachers' collective role in reform: Mapping the gaps between the expert and the public understandings of teachers' unions*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

^{xvi} See <http://frameworksinstitute.org/education.html> for our collection of previous reports that explore the effects of values on public thinking about education reform.

^{xvii} Simon, Adam F. (2011). *Building support for teachers' unions: The role of values framing*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

^{xviii} Erard, *Teacher support on the rise*.

^{xix} Lakoff, George & Johnson, Mark. (2003). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press, 2nd edition.

^{xx} Quinn, N. (2005). *Finding culture in talk: A collection of methods*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

^{xxi} Kendall-Taylor, Nathaniel. (2009). *Orchestrating systems and remodeling reform: Reframing education reform with simplifying models*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

^{xxii} Lakoff, George. (2004). *Don't think of an elephant! Know your values and frame the debate*. Chelsea Green Publishing. White River Jct., Vermont.

^{xxiii} See Charles M. Blow, "In honor of teachers," *The New York Times*, September 3, 2011, for an example of this juxtaposition.

^{xxiv} For more on this point, see Gilliam, Franklin. (2006). *Vivid examples: What they mean and why you should be careful using them*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

^{xxv} Kendall-Taylor, N. & Bales, S. (2009). *Like Mars to Venus: The separate and sketchy worlds of budgets and taxes*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

^{xxvi} See O'Neil, *Getting on the right side of change* for more on this point.