



Magic Bullets Hanging by a Thread:

Cognitive Media Analysis of Structures
of Education and Education Policies
and Programs

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INTRODUCTION

Media stories about the failures of the U.S. education system and the poor performance of the students it is supposed to serve are commonplace. Less frequent are discussions about the structural and policy-level factors that shape student outcomes, and the ways in which these factors can be manipulated to improve educational outcomes. This report examines how American media frames these macro aspects of education — in particular, the education programs, policies and interventions that constitute the overall structure of the system. By structure, we mean how the United States system of education is organized and how this organization aids or impedes education reform. This analysis finds that, while calls for education reform are ubiquitous in contemporary media, rare are discussions of *how* the American public education system is, and should be, structured, and *how* and *why* specific policies and programs work.

This report is part of a set of analyses that examines media coverage of education and learning issues.¹ The compendium of media reports is designed to inform experts and advocates about the patterned ways in which the media commonly represent education issues and how these patterns interact with public understanding. In order to do this, FrameWorks researchers first map the common streams of opinions, arguments and narratives that constitute “public discourses” about learning and education. FrameWorks then analyzes how the media coverage compares to the kinds of messages education experts and advocates are trying to disseminate. Finally, researchers compare the dominant frames in the media to findings from research detailing the cultural models — or shared, patterned and implicit understandings and assumptions — that Americans use to think about issues related to learning and education.² This final comparison demonstrates *how* patterns in media coverage are likely to interact with, and potentially influence, public understanding.

In this particular report, FrameWorks researchers map the contours of the media’s coverage of education structures, policies and programs by examining a sample of 338 media stories that cover structures of education and 238 media stories that cover education programs and policies. This sample of stories was drawn from print and broadcast media sources between October 1, 2010, and October 1, 2011. Findings are based on in-depth quantitative, qualitative and cognitive analyses of these stories. By analyzing the ways that the media constrain and enable public understanding of specific issues, this report provides an assessment of the challenges and opportunities that education reform advocates face when responding to, and informing, the media coverage of issues related to these macro aspects of education.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Media stories about education structures, policies and programs are typically concerned with either diagnosing specific problems in the education system or identifying specific solutions. The following themes characterized these two categories.

- **Diagnosing the Problem: The education system is highly politicized and is experiencing a funding crisis.** The *Conflict Over Cooperation* and *Funding In Crisis* frames dominate the media's coverage of education structures. Using these frames, the media portrays the education system as being in a state of disrepair, dysfunction and financial collapse, and highlights combative relationships between various levels of government, between parents and teachers, and between local schools and district administrators.
- **Finding Solutions: Education reformers and politicians have failed to find the “magic bullet” that solves education issues, necessitating a turn to local and market-based solutions.** The media promote the idea that there is an elusive “magic bullet” capable of transforming the education system and dramatically improving educational outcomes. This *Magic Bullet* frame downplays the complexity of education reform and implies that improving education requires a visionary leader and a single solution, rather than a purposeful undertaking composed of multiple concrete, evidence-based measures. Combined with the *Local Solutions Work Best* frame, this pattern of coverage crowds out consideration of government policies as effective tools of reform. Instead, the media portray the private sector as the locus of innovative and effective policies and programs, and as the last hope for transforming the education system.

These patterns of media coverage reinforce, rather than contest or expand, existing ways in which the public thinks about education structures and policies and the potential for meaningful reform. The media contain shallow coverage of the many actors involved in the education system and the processes that underlie specific reforms. This ultimately contributes to the public's already weak understanding of how the education system is set up and how it might be improved. In addition, portrayals of the education system as a political battleground are likely to deepen public pessimism about the possibility of effective reforms. In light of these findings, FrameWorks recommends that advocates employ *Orchestra Effect* and *Remodeling Education* — two explanatory metaphors that FrameWorks has developed to demonstrate the “systemness” of education and to concretize processes of reform. These explanatory metaphors stand to be useful communications tools for counteracting these patterns of coverage and expanding the public discourse on education structures and policies.

RESULTS

Media coverage related to education structures, policies and programs can be divided into two types: coverage that focuses on the problems of the education system, and coverage that offers solutions to those problems. Each emphasis is associated with specific frames that implicitly structure the ways in which education-related problems and solutions are understood. These two types of coverage, and their associated frames, are described in detail in the following sections.

1. Diagnosing the Problem

1A. *The Funding In Crisis Frame*

Prior FrameWorks research has found that both media and public discourses on education and education reform draw heavily upon crisis language, portraying the problems of the education system as both inevitable and intractable. Crisis language dominated the media's coverage of the financial aspects of the education system in particular, and was evident in approximately 20 percent of media stories in the sample analyzed here. Journalists and commentators used inflammatory and catastrophic language to describe an education system in financial collapse — with budgets described as “hanging by a thread” after being the target of “assaults” and “beatings.”

This spring, the Texas legislature, led by Governor Rick Perry, has committed assault against the students and teachers of the state of Texas — a state which already is 44th in the nation in its funding of education. Draconian budget cuts were threatened from the beginning of the session as lawmakers realized there would be a substantial budget shortfall (largely brought on by the Governor's and legislature's decision to reduce property taxes in 2006) and as Tea Party affiliated candidates funded by outside groups took an overly predominant role.³

Public investments in early childhood education pay off big-time, with every dollar spent yielding increased tax revenues and reduced spending on child welfare, special education and grade retention. Yet, in statehouses across the country, from Texas to Pennsylvania to Florida, early childhood education is hanging by a thread. The assault on this foundation of our students' academic success, not to mention our civic society, is relentless.⁴

Education budgets are taking a beating in about two dozen states, requiring a drastic scaling back in programs in many cases, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. In South Dakota's largest school district, for example, 10 percent cuts to K-12 education are tantamount to cutting all bus services, athletic programs and art

*programs. Education budgets are getting so lean in Mississippi, Missouri and Nebraska that they are breaching statutory funding formulas — yet further cuts are being negotiated this year. And for the third consecutive year in New York, education cuts are on the table despite a court order to increase funding to schools that need it most.*⁵

In these and other stories in this sample, journalists portrayed the education system as in dire financial straits — with enormous consequences both for children’s learning and for civil society as a whole. Only rarely did articles describe pragmatic solutions that could offset the implication that the financial crisis facing the education system is insurmountable. These stories further underscore the ubiquity of the *Crisis* frame in the media’s coverage across education-related topics.⁶

By foregrounding the financial and budgetary aspects of the education system, these stories also conflated the *structure* of education with the *funding* of education. That is, they implied that education structures exist primarily to channel financial resources, and that interactions between parts of this system — for example, between state legislatures and local school districts — consist solely of budgetary mandates. Structural and financial arrangements are certainly intertwined, and understanding one is critical to understanding the other. However, media characterizations that treat the two interchangeably leave little room to consider the many ways in which structural, programmatic and policy-related aspects of the education system influence how learning and skill development happen at the classroom level.

1B. The Conflict Instead of Cooperation Frame

Media coverage emphasized conflict across, and within, various levels of the education system, with over one in five of the stories in the sample employing an argumentative tone. These stories described education structures and policies as characterized by competing interests — between public schools and charter schools, between school boards and their communities, between teachers’ unions and political figures, and between the education policies of the major political parties — with little sense of collective or shared responsibility.

By focusing on conflicts among parents, schools and teachers, these stories encourage the perception that parents must learn to fight against an inherently dysfunctional system in order to ensure that their children have access to high-quality educational opportunities. Such coverage further reinforces the view, already dominant in public discourse, that what is needed to improve educational outcomes is greater vigilance on the part of parents, rather than policy-level change.

PERRY: They need to fill their superintendent's e-mail box full of their concerns and so every time she wakes up in the morning she knows there is somebody watching and they are accountable for that which is going on with their children's lives.

ROMANS: Number three, get a seat at the table with the decision-makers, and number four you say, if all else fails, sue them. Is that the part that means picking a fight that is in the subtitle of your book?

PERRY: No doubt. The problem is that we have done the civil rights thing and we marched and cried and sang negro spirituals and all that, and what we've gotten is the same old failed school system. Enough is enough. Our children deserve an American education, which means it should be the best in the world, which means that every single child should be put forward ahead of adults.”⁷

Only half of the stories concerned with structural aspects of the education system included any mention of specific policies and programs. Those that did tended to focus primarily on the problematic political machinations behind these policies. In their coverage of the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind, in particular, the media emphasized how partisan fighting contributes to “gridlock” and “paralysis.”

Congressional gridlock is damaging more than just the budget and the economy. The paralysis on Capitol Hill is also putting U.S. education at risk, including in our region. According to recent standardized test results, growing numbers of schools in Virginia, Maryland and the District potentially face punishment under federal law for failing to meet exam score goals that are draconian and unrealistic and should have been changed years ago. The problem is Congress's failure to update the No Child Left Behind law. Anybody who's been paying attention has long known that it has serious shortcomings. But the Democrats failed to overhaul it when they controlled Congress until early this year, and now tea party Republicans are making it harder still to do what's right.⁸

In short, the *Conflict Instead of Cooperation* frame implies that the state of the education system is one of dysfunction and mutual disregard between constituent components. Each actor within the system, whether a parent, school district or political party, was portrayed as looking out for his or her own self-interest — with the result being that a “win” for one inevitably means a loss for another. Ideas of collaboration and cooperation were not prominent parts of the media discourse.

2. Finding Solutions

2A. The Visionary Leader Frame

Prior FrameWorks research has found that the public typically attributes responsibility for educational outcomes to the “tangible triad” of parents, teachers and students.⁹ While acknowledging a broader range of education actors, media stories in this sample that were ostensibly about macro aspects of the education system displayed a strong tendency to reduce the complexity of a multi-actor system to the actions and characteristics of a single individual in a leadership role. In doing so, journalists portrayed superintendents, education commissioners and other individuals in leadership roles as proxies for the system or the program itself. These stories described visionary leaders of almost mythic proportions — education figureheads who were able to “win over” teachers and parents and push through unpopular reforms.

Starr merged five tracks into two. When some parents worried that the move would limit top students’ progress, Starr wrote in a local newspaper that they wanted to “slow down progress.” He also suggested that critics were against eliminating “the vestiges of tracking that has kept generations of students of color in Stamford from attaining high-quality education.” Some parents said he was fostering divisions. Others wanted more reform, saying two tiers were one too many. “What he did was really courageous,” said Susana Valdan, a mother of two students in the system. “The middle school transformation was a big change, and it needed to get done. I only wish he would be here to carry it through.”¹⁰

The following excerpt further illustrates how media coverage foregrounded the role of individual actors while relegating elements of the system to the background.

Research has linked student success with a superintendent’s staying power. Yet it’s difficult for districts to keep superintendents for more than a few years. The chief must be academically innovative and politically astute and able to win over unions, school boards and parents. “This is one of most volatile positions in civil service,” said Daniel A. Domenech, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators and a former Fairfax County superintendent. “It’s part in parcel because it’s a very complex job, subject to politics and to public pressure.”¹¹

By highlighting individual actions rather than systemic change, these stories implied that education reform and innovation are essentially an individual, rather than systemic, undertaking. According to this logic, responsibility for both failures and successes falls squarely on individuals — rather than on the structural and policy contexts in which these actors operate and by which they are constrained. Thus,

meaningful change is not about collective public action, but about finding a champion willing to “take on” the opposition.

2B. The Magic Bullet Frame

Journalists and other commentators frequently used the term “magic bullet” or “silver bullet” to describe the process of education reform, implying that there exists one reform or policy initiative that will “magically” address the country’s educational woes. Education reformers were often represented as hopelessly searching for this magic bullet solution to the nation’s education failures.

While the union agrees that a longer school day could improve education, Ms. Lewis said the issue is not that simple. “I think they’re looking at some really small fixes as if this is going to be the magic bullet,” she said. “We’re at a real crossroads in education. With the emphasis on testing, we have narrowed the curriculum. I hope this will broaden the curriculum.” Mr. Emanuel said Friday that he wants to hear from teachers “with ideas of how to improve that instructional time.”¹²

The concept of “magical” solutions also permeated the media’s approach to the processes and mechanisms underlying education reform. Rarely did media articles describe the key elements of reform measures or focus on how and why these elements were linked to improved educational outcomes. Indeed, approximately 40 percent of the articles that covered reform initiatives did not even specify the level of education for which the initiative was designed. New policies and programs were, instead, represented as a kind of magic — leaving readers with little or no sense of what the reform entailed or how or why it worked. This lack of process consideration is displayed in the following excerpts, which describe strong evidence of improvement in educational outcomes but fail to explain the processes by which such gains were achieved. In so doing, they further entrench a key dimension of the *Magic Bullet* frame — namely, that improving educational outcomes is a magical, and even mysterious, process.

Study recognizes middle schools’ achievement

Forest Park and Morrow middle schools are two of 12 schools identified by the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education in a recent study that found them to be not only achieving in their own right but contributing to the success of the high schools they feed. The study updates research from a 2009 Partnership report of 15 high schools that had at least an 85 percent graduation rate in 2008, increased their grade rate by at least 10 percentage points over five years and sustained the 85 percent rate and the 10 percent improvement through 2009.¹³

In addressing Booker T. Washington High School graduates in Memphis last month, President Barack Obama cited the school’s dramatic transformation from dropout factory to a place where four of five students now earn a diploma.

“If success can happen here at Booker T. Washington, it can happen anywhere in Memphis. It can happen throughout Tennessee. And it can happen all across America,” Obama told the graduates. Obama referenced the Memphis school in comments later in the month about the need to replace No Child Left Behind with more flexible federal education policy. “So Booker T. Washington High School is no longer a story about what’s gone wrong in education,” he said in his national weekly address. “It’s a story about how we can set it right. We need to reward the reforms that are driven not by Washington, but by principals and teachers and parents. That’s how we’ll make progress in education — not from the top down, but from the bottom up.”¹⁴

Other media stories described specific failures of the education system, and emphasized the need for new policies and programs to address these issues, but devoted little attention to specific types of interventions that might prove successful and how these measures would work to improve outcomes. In the following excerpt, the journalist provides a detailed description of the consequences of poor school attendance and lays out the need for programs that address juvenile truancy. Specific interventions, however, are only mentioned in passing — even though the story alludes to the availability of evidence-based truancy prevention programs. Similarly, the second excerpt explains the benefits of early child education, but with no description of what this kind of intervention entails. This lack of discussion of specific interventions and how such interventions work further contributes to the *Magic Bullet* frame.

Some politicians and critics of public education conjecture that students skip school because a) they lack teachers capable of motivating them, and b) they are apathetic because of a boring curriculum they perceive as irrelevant to their lives. These speculations are not supported by data. The No Child Left Behind Act requires schools to meet certain benchmarks such as graduation rates, attendance and standardized test scores. Failure to meet those standards, realistic or not, presents serious implications for school systems. Consequently, despite recent budget cuts in programs, personnel and services, reducing the rate of truancy and increasing the graduation rate must be addressed. Improvement gains will require the involvement of the entire school staff (counselors, social workers, psychologists, teachers and administrators) as well as community resources (juvenile justice system, social programs and volunteer groups). The professional literature in fields such as education, counseling and social work contains descriptions of a variety of programs that have achieved some degree of success in reducing student absences. A further review of the literature will generate additional options. We cannot afford to postpone action on the truancy and graduation issues.¹⁵

From breaking the cycle of poverty that is gripping Americans — particularly kids — at historic levels to igniting innovation that can drive our global economic leadership, the scientific and economic data on early childhood education is clear cut.

- *A meaningful investment in high-quality early childhood education — such as enrolling the 40 percent of kids under five who don't attend any sort of preschool program — would add \$2 trillion to the gross domestic product within a generation.*
- *Early childhood education is proven to reduce crime, domestic violence and high school drop-out rates.*
- *And, in rural America, where the poverty crisis has gripped families and communities for generations, it is one of the keys to breaking that cycle once and for all. The War on Poverty, led by Mark's father Sargent Shriver, included significant investments in early childhood education, reducing poverty rates among kids from 25 percent in the mid-1960s to 15 percent 10 years later. Tragically, today, they've increased back to nearly 25 percent.¹⁶*

In privileging the idea of magic bullets that work in unknowable ways over pragmatic, concrete and testable reform measures, the media promulgate the idea that the education system is so dysfunctional as to be beyond “real-world” solutions.

2C. The Local Solutions Work Best Frame

The stories in this sample clearly located innovation, dynamism and meaningful programmatic change at local levels of the education system — even “*as local as an individual teacher and an individual student.*”¹⁷ The media portrayed state and federal actors, on the other hand, as the agents of inflexible and out-of-touch mandates that impose substantial financial burdens on local entities and stifle educational innovation.

The competition has garnered varied reactions. Some cite it as further evidence of a federal takeover of state-run education, like South Carolina Superintendent of Education Mick Zais, who told Education Week: “The Race to the Top program expands the federal role in education by offering pieces of silver in exchange for strings attached to Washington. More federal money for education will not solve our problems. Schools need less, not more, federal intrusion to increase student achievement. The previous two rounds of Race to the Top were not competitive grant programs; they were top-down directives forcing states to adopt programs favored by Washington. Respectfully, South Carolina will not apply for this money.”¹⁸

Facing the threat of layoffs and program cuts, financially ailing districts across New York State are re-examining expenditures and increasingly challenging those mandated by state laws and regulations they find

burdensome, costly or unnecessary. By their count, these officials say, they are forced to abide by more than 250 unfunded state mandates a year, many of which can no longer be sustained.... Not all mandates cost money, but they can rankle nonetheless. One law requires districts to calculate each student's body-mass index, creating yet more paperwork. Other mandates require them to observe Conservation Day and teach about the Irish potato famine, which, they say, are unnecessary because these topics are already covered in earth science and social studies classes.¹⁹

By representing local actors as burdened by out-of-touch, and even suspect, federal demands, these media stories also reinforce the *Conflict* frame described earlier. The education system is portrayed not as a collaboration among multiple actors, but as a struggle by local entities to enact the types of policies and programs they know will work best in the face of unnecessary bureaucratic oversight and intrusion at the state and federal levels.

2D. The Consumerist Frame

FrameWorks' analysis of news stories about where and when learning happens found that journalists portrayed public schools as too mired in bureaucracy to design and implement policies to reshape the temporal and spatial dimensions of the learning process. Instead, these stories pointed to the private sector as the only space capable of this type of innovation.²⁰ This finding also applies to the media's treatment of education policies more broadly. In fact, nearly 50 percent of the media stories in this sample advocated for changes that would in some way mirror private industry — for example, increasing school choice through vouchers and charter schools, and ending union collective bargaining rights. The following excerpts highlight the media's tendency to privilege market-based education reforms.

The 25-year-old Aurora day-care facility was in need of new equipment, new curricula and new business procedures. Compounding the challenge was the fact that the Kims were newcomers to the child-care industry. "I was up at 3 in the morning, trying to make sense of what we needed to do," Laura Kim said. Now, a year later, the center is operating more smoothly — due in large part to a nonprofit program that brings technology and market-based business practices to the child-care and early-childhood- education sectors.²¹

Daniels, who died in 2000, was impatient that education reform wasn't happening fast enough, Childears said. "He wanted us to fund programs that were really trying new and different ways to accomplish things in education," she said. "He specifically mentioned vouchers as a concept that made sense to him based on his belief in the free market and that parents should have the right to determine the best education for their kids." Childears said Daniels was "all about school choice."

Nevertheless, she said, this gift shouldn't signal that the fund will bankroll any voucher plan that crops up.²²

As secretary, Duncan has championed top-down reform efforts embraced by the business sect, such as rapid closure of failing schools; the creation of charter schools; and teacher accountability based on test scores. Vocal educators oppose such means, saying they don't address the heart of the problem.²³

Calls for reforms based on free-market principles were typically accompanied by proposals for specific school districts to move away from, or discontinue, support for traditional public schools and move to more “efficient” models.

A new charter school might be heading to College Park as part of a University of Maryland effort to help prepare Prince George's County students for college. Wallace D. Loh, president of the College Park campus since November, said the school would provide middle- and high-school students with college-level courses, put more students on the path to higher education, and help strengthen ties between the university and the community. The College Park Academy, in its preliminary planning stages, would be a partnership among the university, the city of College Park and Prince George's County Public Schools. Students would take core classes taught by county school system teachers, as well as general education classes taught by university professors, to qualify for college credit. The school would be part of an overall plan to turn College Park into a top-tier college town. Providing a strong charter school that prepares students for higher-level learning also would boost the image of county schools and encourage university faculty and staff to relocate to the area, Loh told the Gazette editorial board.²⁴

The Douglas County School District experiment is noteworthy because nearly all voucher programs nationally aim to help children who are poor, have special needs or are trapped in failing public schools. Douglas County, by contrast, is one of the most affluent in the U.S., with household income nearly double the national median, and has schools ranked among the best in Colorado. The program is also unique in that the district explicitly promotes the move as a way for it to save money. The district is, in effect, outsourcing some students' education to the private sector for less than it would spend to teach them in public schools.²⁵

Journalists often spoke of children as “trapped” in failing public schools, and described vouchers or charter schools as those students' only hope for quality educational experiences. The message is not only that public schools are substandard, but that they are beyond improvement.

COGNITIVE IMPLICATIONS

Based on FrameWorks' documentation of the cultural models available to people when they think about education,²⁶ we conclude that exposure to the media patterns documented above is likely to have the following effects by activating particular, familiar ways of thinking about education structures and interventions.

- **The *Crisis* frame contributes to public paralysis around education issues.** FrameWorks' research, and that of other social scientists, has consistently shown that crisis language depresses public support for policy interventions. When advocates or experts represent social problems as a *crisis*, thereby emphasizing their scope and scale, the public perceives those problems as too big and too intractable to solve. The application of the *Crisis* frame to media discussions of education structures, policies and programs falls into this trap and is, therefore, particularly problematic. Rather than motivating action, it will likely paralyze public mobilization around progressive education policies and decrease senses of efficacy on this issue.
- **Media frames that politicize education, focus on partisan conflict, and prioritize local over federal solutions cue unproductive models of "government."** FrameWorks has been studying public conceptions of government for almost a decade and has examined how the public thinks about the government's role across a number of issue domains, including race and racism,²⁷ budgets and taxes,²⁸ and early childhood development.²⁹ Consistent in this research is the finding that the public perceives government as inept and ineffective — largely because of associations between government and partisan conflict and gridlock. By describing the public education system in terms of antagonism, dissension and self-interest, and criticizing state and federal bureaucracy, the media both activate unproductive models of government and connect them to thinking about education reform. This further depresses public support for policy-based solutions to education concerns and inhibits the public's ability to see the government as a potential solutions actor.
- **The *Magic Bullet* frame will deepen public skepticism about the viability of reform.** FrameWorks' research has documented strong public skepticism towards education reform. The American public is often overwhelmed by the kinds of reforms necessary to address deep and long-standing problems within the education system.³⁰ This sense of futility is further reinforced by Americans' general lack of understanding about *how* education reforms would actually improve the system. That is, the public conceives of reform not as a set of concrete steps designed to update, modernize and improve upon the existing system, but as a start-from-scratch proposition that requires an overwhelming commitment of resources and imagination. The *Magic Bullet* frame contributes to these unproductive understandings of reform by glossing over (or ignoring

completely) discussions of why and how effective reform efforts work. When the media ignores these factors, reform becomes a matter of alchemy — rather than a set of concrete and evidence-based policy decisions. As a result, it is extremely difficult for the public to appreciate the role of public policies in these efforts, and people are left to fall back on a default stance of skepticism towards the possibility of meaningful reform.

- **The *Consumerism* frame reinforces individualist perspectives on the benefits of education and supports calls for privatization.** Across the issue areas included in the Education Core Story Project, FrameWorks has found that the public is highly attuned to the individual benefits of education. When reasoning from this dominant cultural model, the collective benefits of a strong public system are difficult for the public to appreciate — and calls for privatization and market-based reforms become particularly alluring. Media coverage of education structures, policies and programs provides little in the way of counterpoint. Instead, the *Consumerist* frame serves to further entrench these perspectives and obscure consideration of policies to strengthen the structures, policies and programs that comprise the public education system.

Absences

In addition to existing features of the media discourse that are likely to have cognitive implications for the American public, there are also several key absences in this coverage that are likely to affect public understanding.

- **Structures and systems are obscured or narrowly conceived.** Media stories in the sample rarely included meaningful discussions of the structural and systemic aspects of education. Instead, “structure” was described in terms of money (or lack thereof), prominent leaders, or conflict between parts or aspects of systems. These trends minimize the structural aspects of the education system, and, in so doing, reduce learning to an individual endeavor and divorce educational processes and outcomes from broader structures. This absence of systems focus — in a sample that was deliberately constructed to capture structural and policy discussions — contributes to the public’s difficulty in seeing policy-level action as a viable part of the solution to education issues.
- **Discussions of learning and skills are divorced from discussions about structures and systems.** Only 21 percent of the stories in this sample that dealt with structures of education (however narrowly defined) included discussions of skills and learning. The lack of overlap between these two areas in the coverage suggests that media discourse on the relationship between learning and the structural environment in which learning is embedded is extremely thin. By minimizing structural context, the media preclude public consideration of the systemic and policy factors that shape student learning, and further reinforce the

perception that teachers, parents and children are the sole actors of importance in the system and its improvement.

- **There is no sustained discussion of evidence-based interventions.** Media stories devoted little attention to nuanced discussions of the kinds of evidence-based interventions that experts propose. Similar to the *Magic Bullet* frame, the public leaves the public with basis from which to consider interventions and no way of understanding why certain interventions are effective.

CONCLUSION

Media discussions about education programs and policies, and the structures in which they are embedded, are notably thin. Little attention is devoted to understanding how these aspects of the education system are related to skill development and learning that play out in individual classrooms. Furthermore, little of this coverage — in which we would expect to find systems-level discussions — is actually about systems. The thinness of this media discourse is especially evident in coverage of education reform efforts, where the mechanisms and processes that explain *why* and *how* reform measures work are largely overlooked. Taken together, these trends explain why the current media discourse fails to provide the public with the cognitive tools to fully engage in conversations about how reforms fit into the broader structure of the American public education system and create change in that system.

FrameWorks' has developed a number of communications tools that can be used to broaden the public discourse about education reform. Several of these tools focus specifically on helping people think productively about macro aspects of education — what is the system, how does it work, how can reforms affect this system, and what are the potential results of such measures at both systems and individual levels?

- First, the *Educational Orchestra* metaphor represents an important counterpoint to media stories that reduce education structures to conflict by portraying education as an integrated system in which all constituent parts must work together collaboratively in order for the system to function well. This metaphor also helps round out the system by forcing people to think beyond the “Tangible Triad” of parents, teachers and students.
- Second, the *Educational Remodeling* explanatory metaphor, which explains reform as a concrete process composed of specific steps towards specific outcomes, serves as an antidote to the *Magic Bullet* frame. *Remodeling* makes reform thinkable and allows communicators to explain their policy proposals with a level of detail and specificity that is currently missing in the media.
- Third, the use of *Effectiveness Factors* related to specific reform proposals also holds promise for expanding media discourse. This communications tool provides a way for advocates to talk about the evidence base underlying specific reforms and the elements that are common to successful reform efforts.
- Finally, by referencing the value of *Future Preparation*, communicators can orient the public towards the collective importance of a strong public education system — thus neutralizing consumer- and market-based understandings of the education system that crowd out consideration of public policy solutions.

APPENDIX: METHODS

This research is guided by two primary goals: (1) to examine how topics related to learning space and time are regularly treated in the media, and (2) to explore the likely impact of these patterns on the public's thinking on the spatial and temporal dimensions of education. In order to address these goals, the analysis is divided into two stages: (1) a content analysis based on a qualitative and quantitative examination of media materials that reference learning space and time, and (2) a cognitive analysis of the media frames identified in relation to findings from previous cultural models research. Descriptions of the data and analytical techniques are provided below.

Media Content Analysis

A recent Pew Center study suggests that, by and large, Americans receive their daily news from a combination of newspapers (both print and online) and broadcast news sources.³¹ Sample selection in the current study was based on this assumption and included materials taken from national newspaper articles and television broadcasts, as well as three news blogs representing a span of political perspectives. Using the LexisNexis, Factiva and Google News databases, specific news sources were selected based on circulation/viewership statistics and geographical and political diversity. The sample was drawn from the following print sources: *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *San Jose Mercury News*, *New York Post*, *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Houston Chronicle*, *The Denver Post*, *Chicago Sun-Times* and *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Sources used to construct the sample also included national television newscasts from ABC, CBS, NBC, CNBC, MSNBC, CNN and FOX News Network, and the *Huffington Post*, *Hot Air*, *National Review* and *Daily Beast* blogs. The study sample was selected from these sources over a one-year period from October 1, 2010, to October 1, 2011.

Media stories were captured from the databases if they included at least five mentions of the words "education" or "learning." This threshold of number of mentions ensured that the sample squarely dealt with issues related to education and learning and avoided materials that mentioned education in passing, but that were not focused on education content or issues. The search strategy was also designed to be sufficiently broad so as to capture stories that covered a wide range of education issues and allow for analysis of more specific education issues including skills and learning, assessment, educational disparities, structure of the education system, and education policies and programs. The initial capture procedure yielded 1,346 stories. Each of these media stories was assigned a number and researchers used a random number generator to select 570 stories that comprised the final study sample. Of these, 106 dealt squarely with issues related to learning space and time and were included for analysis for this report.

The media content analysis was conducted in two stages. First, FrameWorks researchers developed a codebook based on standard coding categories utilized in previous FrameWorks content analysis research and in the framing literature more generally.³² Those categories include:

1. Storytelling style (episodic vs. thematic)
2. Tone
3. Section of the newspaper
4. Age-group, race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status of the students mentioned
5. Types of messengers/experts cited
6. Values
7. Mentions of specific policies and programs.

In addition to the codes above, each story was coded for whether or not it addressed the following areas of interest: skills and learning, assessment, learning space and time, educational disparities, structure of the education system, and education policies and programs.

After the codebook was developed, three researchers were trained in its application. To test for inter-coder reliability, each researcher coded a set of 25 randomly selected media stories from the sample. The researchers achieved an inter-coder reliability score of 0.8 using Holsti's coefficient — indicating a respectable 80 percent agreement across the coded themes.³³ After the reliability test, we coded the remaining stories and subjected the resulting quantitative data to statistical analysis examining the frequency of codes within each category. In addition, selected cross-tabulations were computed to examine relationships between codes.

In the second stage of analysis, the sample was divided into the areas of interest and each area was subjected to a qualitative analysis of dominant narratives. In this stage, researchers analyzed the dominant frames that structured media discussion about skills and learning, assessment, learning space and time, educational disparities, structure of the education system, and education policies and programs. The results of these analyses are presented in separate reports.

Cognitive Analysis

The cultural models findings referred to in this document are based on over 70 one-on-one, semi-structured interviews conducted between 2008 and 2012 on issues related to education, including education and education reform, digital media and learning, skills and learning, assessment, and learning space and time. Consistent with interview methods employed in psychological anthropology, cultural models interviews are designed to elicit ways of thinking and talking about issues.³⁴ Patterns of discourse, or common, standardized ways of talking, were identified across the sample using a basic grounded theory approach to thematic analysis. These discourses were then analyzed to reveal tacit organizational assumptions, relationships, propositions and connections

that were commonly made, but taken for granted, throughout an individual's transcript and across the sample. In short, analysis looked at patterns both in what was said (how things were related, explained and understood) as well as what was not said (shared, but taken-for-granted, assumptions).

Finally, to examine expert messages on education and learning, FrameWorks researchers conducted 20 one-on-one, one-hour phone interviews with experts from the fields of education, psychology and early childhood development. These interviews were conducted in late 2011 to early 2012 and, with participants' permission, were recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis. To locate experts, FrameWorks surveyed a group of leading foundations working on education issues.

In the cognitive component of this analysis, FrameWorks researchers compared findings from the media analysis with results from the cultural models interviews in order to examine how media frames are likely to intersect with the cultural models that currently inform public thinking. This analysis addresses multiple patterns of intersection, including how media frames might (1) cue and strengthen existing cultural models, (2) conflict with or challenge existing models, and/or (3) fail to address a topic such that extant patterns of thinking are left to "fill in the blanks." The analysis also provides an etiological understanding of dominant media frames, as the relationship between frames in media and culture in mind is not unidirectional.³⁵ In this way, the media analysis enables FrameWorks to identify the likely cognitive impacts of media framing and to formulate strategic recommendations for experts and advocates who communicate about education and learning.

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ABOUT THE FRAMEWORKS INSTITUTE

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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