

Reframing School Discipline

A STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS PLAYBOOK

2017



How can advocates for more effective, more equitable approaches to school discipline talk about this issue in a way that deepens understanding, attracts new allies, and builds a larger constituency for meaningful change?

This strategic messaging playbook offers guidance. It outlines 12 evidence-based framing strategies that communicators in the education, justice, and civil rights sectors can use to challenge exclusionary discipline policies, build support for reducing racial disparities in disciplinary outcomes, and cultivate awareness of alternative approaches such as restorative justice and trauma-informed schools.

The recommendations are based on a Strategic Frame Analysis[®] conducted by the FrameWorks Institute. Since 1999, FrameWorks research has demonstrated that effective communications can help activate the public's engagement with complex social issues—such as the reforms needed to ensure that school climates support positive outcomes for all children. FrameWorks' approach begins by investigating the patterns of thinking that structure public opinion on social issues, and then systematically develops and tests different ways of translating expert views to the public. The goal is to find the most effective ways of inviting the public into conversations on pressing policy topics, so that community decision-making can be more informed by research and evidence.

In advancing greater social justice in the United States, it is critical to ensure that the nation's schools serve as gateways to fuller participation in economic, social, and political life, particularly for youth of color and other marginalized groups. We hope that you find these framing tools and techniques helpful in your work to support greater fairness, equality, and justice in American school discipline.

STRATEGIES FOR REFRAMING SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

1

Frame communications with an eye toward **redirecting** public thinking, not merely **rebutting** it.

2

Stay in a collective action frame.

3

Go for understanding of causes and consequences, not outrage at absurdity.

4

Don't dwell on "bad actors." Instead, pivot to "bad policies."

5

Talk about implicit bias. But don't just name it; explain it.

6

Unpack the chain of events that unfolds when children are removed from the classroom.

7

Offer a compelling alternative vision by explaining how supportive discipline works.

8

Anticipate public thinking about race, and craft explanations that prevent deficit thinking and promote structural thinking.

9

Take extra measures to cue structural interpretations of any data on disparities.

10

Consistently use language, imagery, and tone that cue the Value of **Pragmatism**, and avoid Values that could cue "us vs. them" thinking.

11

Highlight structural solutions that go beyond "training" and "awareness."

12

When talking about the connections between student behavior and mental health, use **Toxic Stress** to position the issue.

1. Frame communications with an eye toward redirecting public thinking, not merely rebutting it.

To advance meaningful changes in school discipline approaches, advocacy efforts must advance a powerful, compelling view of what alternative approaches can accomplish. From a communications perspective, this goal differs in some important ways from a focus on “dismantling” the school-to-prison pipeline. While it is important to disrupt and replace the systems and policies that send students into the maze of the criminal justice system, critiquing the status quo can only take advocates so far. An important part of any social movement entails expanding the constituencies that support the issue—and at this juncture, frames play a critical role. When a movement’s frames are large enough to encompass the values and interests of a diverse set of actors, the movement can gain strength in numbers. In contrast, when frames are too narrow to attract new allies and build broader constituencies, then movements can fail, even after momentum has been gained and when structural conditions seem ripe.

This larger strategic goal implies a specific communications tactic, which is to adopt and maintain an explanatory stance, rather than an argumentative or persuasive tone. Avoid partisan language or other cues for an ideological stance, such as questioning the motivations of opponents or detractors. Reframing is often a matter of changing the context of a conversation—and very rarely a matter of “winning” an argument.

Understanding is Frame Dependent

What does it take to change the context of a conversation? The first step is to understand the current context. Members of the public are not blank slates. They always bring a strong set of default assumptions to bear on discussions of any contemporary public problem—including school discipline. In the case of school discipline and its effect on youth outcomes, communications are always interpreted through and with assumptions about schools, behavior, child and youth development, race, and more.

Strategic framers plan, review, and revise all communications by anticipating how their messages will be interpreted by dominant thinking.

How will the public interpret this message? “African American students are expelled at three times the rate of their white counterparts.” FrameWorks research shows that the default assumption is that African American students are punished more often because they misbehave more frequently or more severely. Yet, the research also shows that when communications build in more cues for the role of systemic or structural reasons for disparities, the American public can appreciate this perspective.¹

Understanding is frame dependent. So, first and foremost, consider the patterns of thinking that your messaging will encounter. Then, work from *that* understanding, rather than your own, when framing communications materials.

2. Stay in a collective action frame.

One of the most important framing decisions that advocates can make is to consistently frame school discipline reform as a shared responsibility with shared consequences. Without explicit cues to consider youth issues as a public problem that demands public policy solutions, the public tends to understand these topics as matters that concern only children and their families. And when it comes to a topic such as student discipline, FrameWorks research has shown that the public’s default assumption is that the problem’s underlying cause is in the **Family Bubble**—the choices and conditions within a household. Here’s a quote from a research participant that illustrates this type of thinking:

“Everybody’s got the opportunity; it’s the same across the board. But, as we discussed earlier, there are better schools, there are worse schools. There are some parents who don’t require that their children go to school. They let the kids decide what they want to do ... So, it’s hard to say who’s responsible for ‘fixing the disparities.’”

When the public misunderstands the causes, they also reason their way to ineffective solutions. When people understand issues as individual or group problems, they may feel critical or compassionate, but they won’t see policies and programs as the solutions. They may also conclude that there are no real public policy solutions, because the cause of the problem lies within the home. Framing school discipline reform as a collective endeavor will prevent people from tuning out and thinking they have no part to play in reform.

The Context is Community

To advance a collective action frame, be strategic in identifying the problem as one that involves the entire community. Explicitly communicate that providing all American children with access to a positive school experience is a matter of public concern. Discipline policies have an effect on our community (defined locally, regionally, or nationally) and, therefore, everyone has a stake in change.

The remaining recommendations in this playbook offer a variety of specific techniques that can help to fill out a collective action frame. In addition to using the suggested framing tools, consider adopting an overarching essential question as you review your communications: “Does this framing position school discipline as an issue that matters to all of us, or only to those who are being immediately affected?”

Recommendation in action:

Sample Letter to the Editor

To the editors:

I don’t have children in our local public schools any longer, but as a lifelong resident of this city, I’ve been paying close attention to the data on suspensions and expulsions in our elementary and middle schools. Because our schools are creating our city’s future, we all have a stake in ensuring that they use approaches that work. Unfortunately, the current discipline policies don’t help kids—and, according to research, they actually make things worse. We have a responsibility to let school leaders know: Our community doesn’t want our schools to use outdated, ineffective discipline techniques that make it harder for kids to learn from problems or mistakes. I’m working to make my voice heard by writing to members of the school board and contacting district administrators. I hope other readers will join me.

3. Go for understanding of causes and consequences, not outrage at absurdity.

When advocating for systems-level change, helping the public understand systems-level causes and consequences is more effective than telling attention-grabbing stories about egregious instances of misconduct. While an outrageous story may grab the public’s attention for a news cycle or two, it does not help them understand why or how school discipline needs to change more broadly. As the influential political scientist Shanto Iyengar has observed, “Confronted with a parade of news stories describing particular instances or illustrations of national issues, viewers focus on individual and group characteristics rather than historical, social, political, or other such structural forces.”² In other words: Outrageous stories are, by their very nature, difficult to generalize from. They might generate sympathy or outrage for individuals, but in the long run, they don’t do much to build support for policies.

For example, telling the story of Ahmed and his clock may resonate with the “choir,” but without an explanation of how implicit bias works, it does little to shift the thinking of those who don’t already align with a progressive perspective. Telling the story of a preschooler handcuffed for throwing food might elicit concern from people with young children, but unless context and process is included, it misses the opportunity to bolster broader understanding about why the presence of school resource officers often leads to the criminalization of student behavior.

Don’t fall for the **Extreme Incident** trap by expecting sensational stories to speak for themselves. Instead, use every opportunity (including sensational cases) to build understanding about the mechanisms, processes, policies, systems, or structures that shaped the context of the incident.

“Confronted with a parade of news stories describing particular instances or illustrations of national issues, viewers focus on individual and group characteristics rather than historical, social, political, or other such structural forces.”

Recommendation in action:

Sample Blog Headlines

INSTEAD OF THIS:

Preschooler suspended for hugging friend; parents baffled.

Nine-year-old arrested, handcuffed for passing notes in class.



TRY THIS:

School ends “zero tolerance” policy, suspension rate drops.

Police presence in schools can lead to arrests for minor infractions. Here’s why.

Explanatory Chains

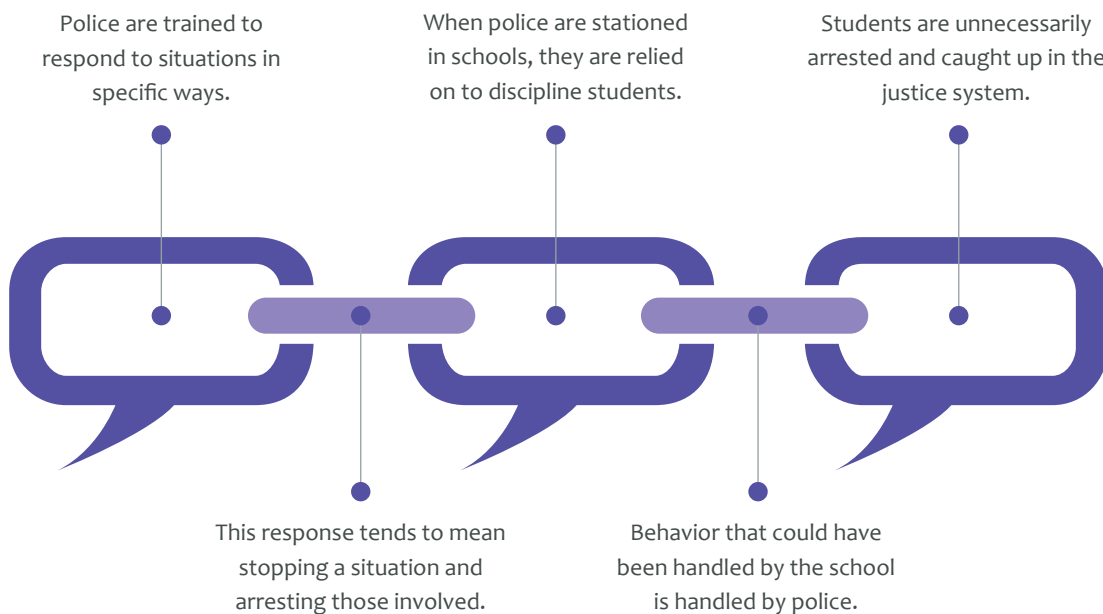


An effective Explanatory Chain can provide the public with an alternative way of understanding an issue, and lead them to more fully appreciate advocates' suggested solutions. When talking with people unfamiliar with the issue, it is important to include more "links" than are needed with allies or insiders. Back up a step or two from the policy issues that insiders have already pinpointed as problems, and explain the facts that experts tend to take for granted. Extend the chain past the problematic policy so that the public can see why and how the policy leads to unwanted outcomes.

Will this take longer? Maybe. Does that matter? Not as much as one might think. Communications professionals often use simple, direct language to facilitate comprehension and enhance retention. This, however, can be risky when communicating about complex social issues. When the topic is race, brevity can cue unproductive thinking. So, the communicator is faced with a choice: Either take the time that's needed to frame the issue fully and effectively—or risk reinforcing the frame that the public brings. Keep reading for specific frame elements that can help to redirect deficit thinking about children and communities of color and build understanding of how systems, structures, and policies shape outcomes.

The Policing Explanatory Chain

Explanatory Chains give people the context they need to more fully understand an issue. This diagram of the Policing Explanatory Chain shows the "links" communicators need to include in a full explanation, beginning with why police might respond to student misbehavior with arrest.



4. Don't dwell on "bad actors." Instead, pivot to "bad policies."

As American culture has a strongly held model of **Individualism**, the American public has no difficulty blaming individuals for outcomes. In the context of conversations on school discipline, the **Individualism** model shapes assumptions that "bad teachers" or "racist cops" are responsible for problems that come to the public's attention. In fact, FrameWorks research found that Americans blamed "rotten eggs" for most problems in the criminal justice system, and assumed the system was working just fine otherwise.³ As for problems in the education system, Americans found it easy to reason that they were the result of undisciplined students, inattentive parents, or teachers who didn't "care."

What's wrong with telling stories that highlight, for example, the egregious behavior of a particular school resource officer—especially if that's the kind

of story people find easy to understand? The danger is that meeting people where they are rarely gets advocates where they want to go. If a story frames the issue in terms of a problematic individual, then the public won't reason their way to systems-level solutions. Instead of seeing the need to rethink personnel policies or district-level disciplinary codes, the public will gravitate to the solution that seems to fit the problem. They will, in other words, focus on the person who committed the infraction rather than the structural issues that contributed to it.

Always be careful to explain how policies—not individuals—lead to negative or disparate outcomes in school discipline. Likewise, position the problems as matters of broad, shared concern, and their solutions as beneficial to all of society, not just the affected individuals.

Recommendation in action:

Sample Facebook Posts

The image displays two sample Facebook posts from a user named "Advocate". Each post is shown in a simulated Facebook interface with a blue header bar that says "Share on Facebook" and a dropdown menu set to "Share on your own Timeline".

The first post has a profile picture of a person and the text: "Police are trained to respond to stop crime, not redirect misbehavior. When police are in schools, more students end up getting arrested for 'kid stuff,' leading young people into the maze of the criminal justice system. There are practical alternatives to managing student behavior – like the one illustrated in this article. <http://yourlinkhere>".

The second post has the same profile picture and the text: "When police are in schools, teachers are more likely to rely on them to handle problems that come up with students. Because police are trained to arrest people and send them along to judges to figure out what happened, this leads to young people getting criminal records for things that once would have once been handled in the principal's office. Shouldn't we have educators handle student discipline issues? Sign our petition to the school board here: <http://yourlinkhere>".

Both posts show interaction icons (likes, comments, shares) and a sharing menu with "Friends", "Cancel", and "Post to Facebook" options.

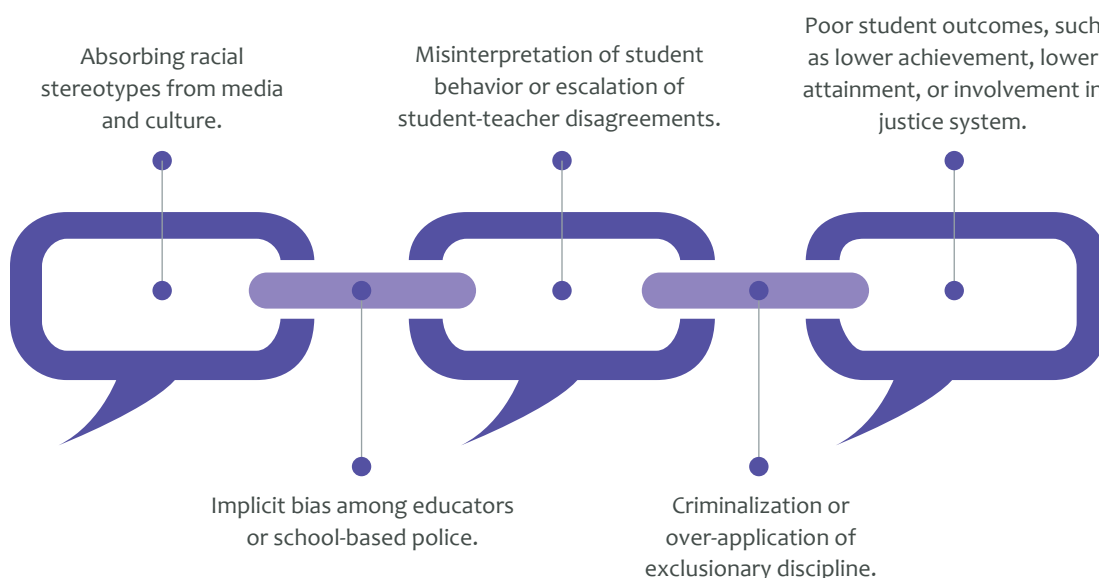
5. Talk about implicit bias. But don't just name it; explain it.

Advocates for more inclusive and just school climates face a major communications hurdle: the public's incomplete understanding of the role of race and racism in creating disparities. Simply naming the issue doesn't do enough, because both the American public and the media tend to understand the term "racism" to refer to an interpersonal dynamic typically enacted through blatant and overt discriminatory actions. Merely adding a descriptor is also inadequate to shift public thinking; terms such as institutional racism or structural racism are likely to be interpreted as the sum of all racist interactions and discriminatory practices between individuals within an institution.

The study that informs this playbook offers a clear recommendation for how to introduce the role of race in school discipline. FrameWorks researchers found that a fully articulated, cause-and-effect explanation of implicit bias was an especially powerful way of shifting public thinking about school discipline, with many desirable "spillover effects" on a range of related issues. When people understood implicit bias, it affected their thinking not only about racial disparities in schools but also led them to oppose the use of exclusionary discipline; express a preference for more restorative approaches to school discipline; and demonstrate a fuller understanding of how the intersection of school discipline and the juvenile justice system results in inequity.

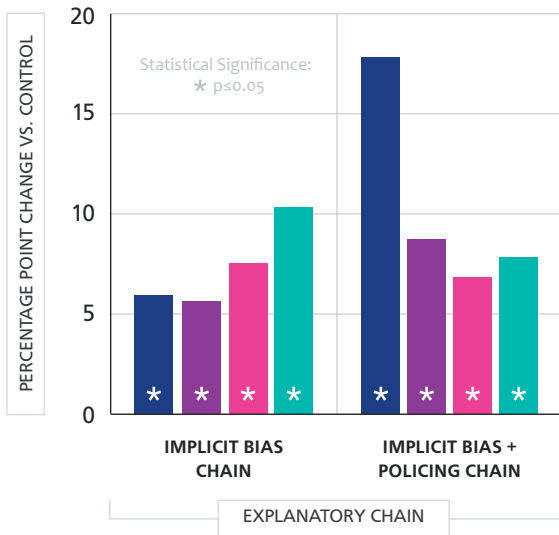
The *Implicit Bias Explanatory Chain*

It is critical to explain the mechanisms of Implicit Bias—naming it is not enough. Explanatory Chains should back up a step or two to explain the sources of implicit bias. And they should extend past the disciplinary action all the way to student outcomes. Here's a schematic that shows the essential links that communications should connect for the public:



The Results behind the Recommendation:

Effects of the *Implicit Bias Explanatory Chain* on knowledge.



FrameWorks’ experimental testing found that an the *Implicit Bias Explanatory Chain* shifted public thinking about school discipline in productive directions.

- JUVENILE JUSTICE/POLICING
- EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE OUTCOMES
- SUPPORTIVE DISCIPLINE OUTCOMES
- IMPLICIT BIAS

Recommendation in action:

Sample Website Copy

Our schools’ discipline policies must be updated to take into account what psychologists and other scientists have discovered about how implicit bias affects people’s interpretations of events and actions. Implicit bias causes “shortcuts” in our brains—quick interpretations that don’t always lead to the right conclusion. Starting in early childhood, we take in messages and use those messages later on to automatically form judgments. The kinds of messages we receive affect the kinds of judgments we make. Because of influences like daily news coverage and common movie plots, many people subconsciously associate African Americans with violence. This means that educators, like the rest of us, are more likely to view a Black student’s behavior as more “violent” or “criminal” than a white student’s, even if they both did the same thing. Because of this, Black students are punished more often and more harshly than white students. All this adds up to a problematic and impractical situation: Even when Black students are not behaving differently, they are treated differently. National data shows that African American students are 3.5 times more likely to be expelled than white students. Data also show that boys are more likely to be punished than girls, and students with disabilities are more likely to be punished than their peers. Implicit bias plays a role in all these trends.

When educators receive training on this issue, they can learn how to recognize their own implicit bias. This makes it less likely that they will act on the “snap judgments” caused by implicit bias, and more likely to apply discipline policies in an even-handed way. Some schools and districts are going a step further, rethinking the way they handle all discipline issues. In some cases, they are getting rid of out-of-school suspension altogether, and adopting different approaches that are fairer and more effective.

By making the commonsense step of taking implicit bias into account in our schools’ policies and practices, we can make sure that all students are treated fairly, feel welcome in school, and get every opportunity to learn. Learn more about this important issue and get involved.

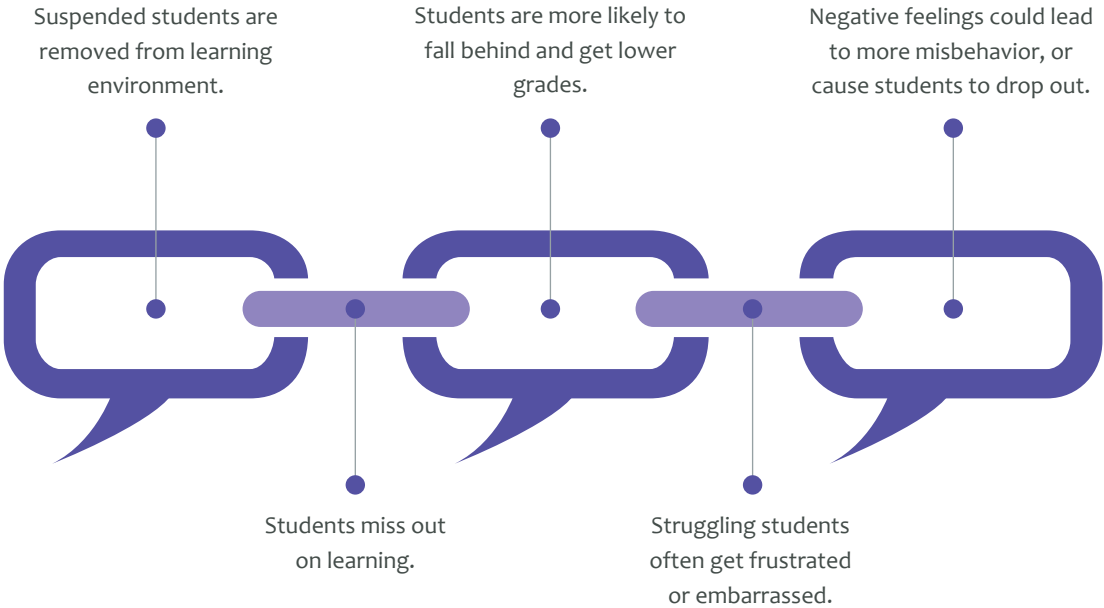
6. Unpack the chain of events that unfolds when children are removed from the classroom.

Advocates can't assume that the public appreciates the negative impacts associated with exclusionary discipline, nor can they expect the public to understand that punishment does not help a child learn good behavior. In studies investigating Americans' thinking about youth development, FrameWorks researchers have documented a common assumption that "consequences" are the only way children learn to behave. This quote from a research participant illustrates this widely shared way of thinking about punishment:

"If the child steps out of line and the teacher punishes or whatever, I'm happy because you're putting my kid back in line and it's doing me a favor. Parents complain, but your kid's not paying attention. You're not getting the respect. How's he going to make it in life? You think when this child grows up he's going to be able to get a job? He's running around screaming, jumping on tables and yelling, and doing whatever he wants to do. You think he's going to make it? Not going to happen!"⁶

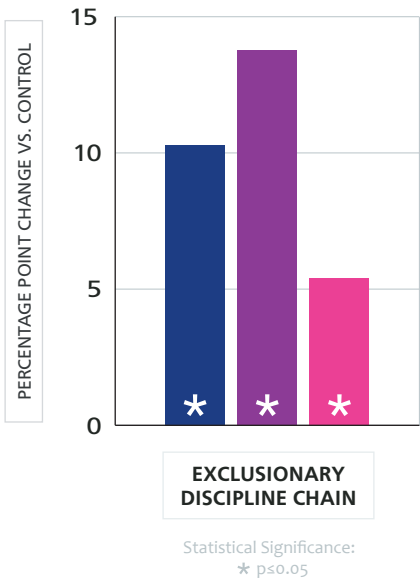
The Exclusionary Discipline Explanatory Chain

Citing studies and stacking up statistics won't dislodge this kind of thinking, but a satisfying alternative explanation can. By unpacking how exclusionary discipline negatively impacts students, advocates can redirect this kind of thinking and, instead, help the public understand that punishment makes positive outcomes less likely, not more. This diagram shows the "links" to include to help the public think through the academic and social outcomes of suspensions.



The Results behind the Recommendation:

Explaining exclusionary discipline boosts public understanding.



FrameWorks’ survey found that the *Exclusionary Discipline Explanatory Chain* boosted understanding of the negative impacts of exclusionary discipline, increased understanding of the positive impacts of alternative approaches, and led people to demonstrate a fuller understanding of how the intersection of school discipline and the juvenile justice system results in inequity.

- JUVENILE JUSTICE/POLICING
- EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE OUTCOMES
- SUPPORTIVE DISCIPLINE OUTCOMES

Recommendation in action:

Description vs. Explanation

Instead of this:

We know that suspending and expelling kids does not lead to better behavior; it actually hurts students’ future outcomes. Students who are suspended and expelled are far more likely to be held back a year in school, drop out of high school, or get arrested. What’s more, there’s no evidence that suspending or expelling students even helps them behave better. Our schools need to stop relying on harmful techniques that place our children’s futures in jeopardy.

Try this:

When schools rely on suspension or expulsion as discipline methods, they often create more problems than they solve. Students miss lessons, and when they return, they often fall behind. Struggling students can become frustrated, which makes it less likely they will learn and more likely they will act out. Our schools need to stop relying on these unsuccessful approaches and use proven alternatives instead.

7. Offer a compelling alternative vision by explaining how supportive discipline works.

When advocating for an end to exclusionary discipline practices, it isn't enough merely to point out the problems with them. It is also necessary to include explanations of alternative approaches and show how these alternatives can lead to better outcomes. Without a sense of how school climate could be managed differently, it can be difficult for the public to reject the status quo. On the other hand, the research that informs this playbook found that when the public is offered clear, compelling information about how youth develop strong social-emotional skills and what restorative justice approaches entail, they see these as more appealing alternatives than exclusionary discipline.

FrameWorks tested two different framing techniques for painting a picture of alternatives: **Moral Muscle Memory** and an Explanatory Chain on restorative justice approaches. Both worked to reorient a conversation about “maintaining order in

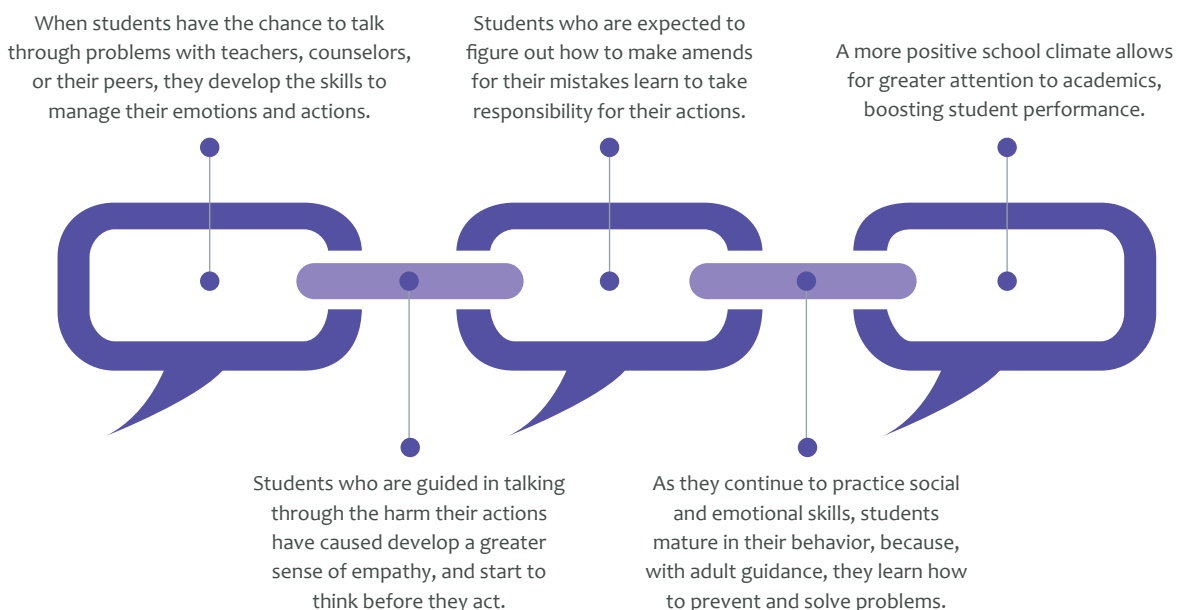
schools” to one about the role of schools in fostering students’ ability to work with others, solve interpersonal problems, and accept responsibility for mistakes.

Moral Muscle Memory explains the process of behavioral development by comparing it to something the public already understands: the role of repetition and practice in developing automatic control over new physical skills, such as riding a bike or playing an instrument. This analogy reframes behavior “problems” as learning opportunities, and focuses the public’s attention on the role of support and regular, sustained time for practice (and failure) in the learning process.

In on-the-street interviews, the Explanatory Metaphor of **Moral Muscle Memory** proved to be an especially “sticky,” or memorable, way to reframe what the issue of school discipline is “about.”

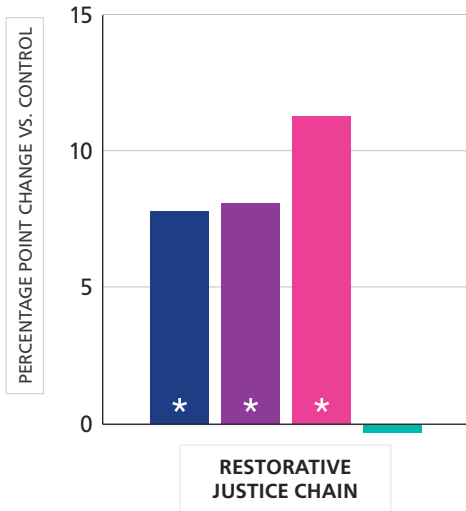
The Restorative Justice Explanatory Chain

The **Restorative Justice Explanatory Chain** described it as “practices that approach behavior issues as a learning opportunity.” The message that researchers tested included these links:



The Results behind the Recommendation:

Effects of the *Restorative Justice Explanatory Chain* on knowledge.



FrameWorks’ experimental testing found that the *Restorative Justice Explanatory Chain* shifted public thinking about school discipline in productive directions.

- JUVENILE JUSTICE/POLICING
- EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE OUTCOMES
- SUPPORTIVE DISCIPLINE OUTCOMES
- IMPLICIT BIAS

Recommendation in action:

Sample Social Media Posts

Compose new Tweet

#restorativejustice works by approaching behavior issues as learning opportunities + helping kids develop social/emotional skill "muscles."

Share on Facebook

Share on your own Timeline

Advocate

Q: How is good behavior like riding a bike? A: Practice makes all the difference. The reason is muscle memory. Just like a near-fall on a bike lets kids learn how to rebalance, behavior issues in school present opportunities to learn social skills. When schools exclude students from class when problems occur, they're missing opportunities to provide the kind of guidance that exercises kids' "behavior muscles." See how this local school district did away with suspensions, built in more reps for developing conflict resolution skills, and got better outcomes as a result: <http://samplelinkhere>.

Friends Cancel Post to Facebook

8. Anticipate public thinking about race, and craft explanations that prevent deficit thinking and promote structural thinking.

In order to pursue and advance policy solutions that build greater racial equity and inclusion, advocates must engage a progressively wider circle of allies, and a broader segment of the public, in thinking about race and racism. The question isn't *whether* to talk about race, it's *how*. The studies that informed this playbook offer insight into ways of framing race that invariably stall or derail conversations, as well as ways that allow for more productive engagement.

The communications “trap” to watch out for most vigilantly is the ***Invisible Process*** trap. The mechanisms that create, reproduce, and maintain inequity are what FrameWorks researchers call an ***Invisible Process*** for the public: They lack a way to think about the connections among underlying causes and the visible symptoms or consequences. When communications leave an ***Invisible Process*** in place, the public falls back on familiar but incomplete or inaccurate explanations, typically locating causes and consequences in individual actions. In the case of disparities in school discipline, the public is likely to either assume that youth are to blame, or apply an overly simplistic story about the racist motivations of individual school actors.

It is important to counteract *Invisible Process* thinking by helping the public grasp the underlying causes for disparities in discipline outcomes. In fact, one of the most important things advocates can do is to build public understanding through ***explanation of the processes*** by which disparities occur. This differs subtly, but critically, from building public awareness through ***description of outcomes*** (i.e., highlighting disproportionate suspension rates without explaining why they occur).

9. Take extra measures to cue structural interpretations of any data on disparities.

Data does not speak for itself. No matter how stark the statistics, they won't disrupt dominant thinking on their own. Communications must establish a frame that allows the public to make sense of the data in the way experts do.

Without framing that helps them understand that data point to systemic problems, the public is likely to fall back on default explanations that point to individual failures, blaming students themselves, or their parents. When FrameWorks researchers⁴ asked Americans, "What causes disparities?" answers like these were common among both whites and African Americans:

"Maybe education isn't important to them. Maybe they just have too much to try to work and feed their family. Time? ...I don't know."

"Well, what causes [disparities] is having the same thing available to you and being unable or unwilling to avail yourself of it. That would cause a disparity, but is that really disparity or is it just not being very smart? If you could pick an education over picking to not have an education, and you picked to be uneducated, that's not really disparity, it's a choice."

To avoid these types of interpretations, anticipate them. When presenting data on disparities, never leave the interpretation of those statistics up to chance. Proactively point the public to the meaning you wish to convey with the data.

The good news: With strong cues for what the data mean, FrameWorks research on criminal justice found that statistics focusing on the disproportionate impact on communities of color were one of the strongest ways of building support for reform.⁵

Recommendation in action:

Naked Numbers vs. Cuing Intended Interpretations

FRAMED WITH "DISPROPORTIONALITY DATA SPEAKS FOR ITSELF"

African American girls make up 16 percent of girls in schools, but 34 percent of girls arrested on campus.

REFRAMED WITH "SETTING UP WHAT THE STATISTICS MEAN"

National data show that school discipline policies are being applied differently across groups. Students of color receive much harsher disciplinary responses than white students—for identical behaviors. Among other things, students of color are disproportionately affected by school-based arrests. For example, African American girls represent only 16 percent of girls in schools, but 34 percent of girls arrested on K-12 campuses.

10. Consistently use language, imagery, and tone that cue the Value of Pragmatism, and avoid Values that could cue “us vs. them” thinking.

There are many different evidence-based arguments to make about why reforming school discipline matters. It affects student achievement, educational attainment, and later involvement in the criminal justice system. It is a matter of equity, inclusion, fairness, and justice. However, whether these points are effective **frames** for the issue is an empirical question. When selecting how to communicate about social issues, strategic framers rely on communications as well as social analyses.

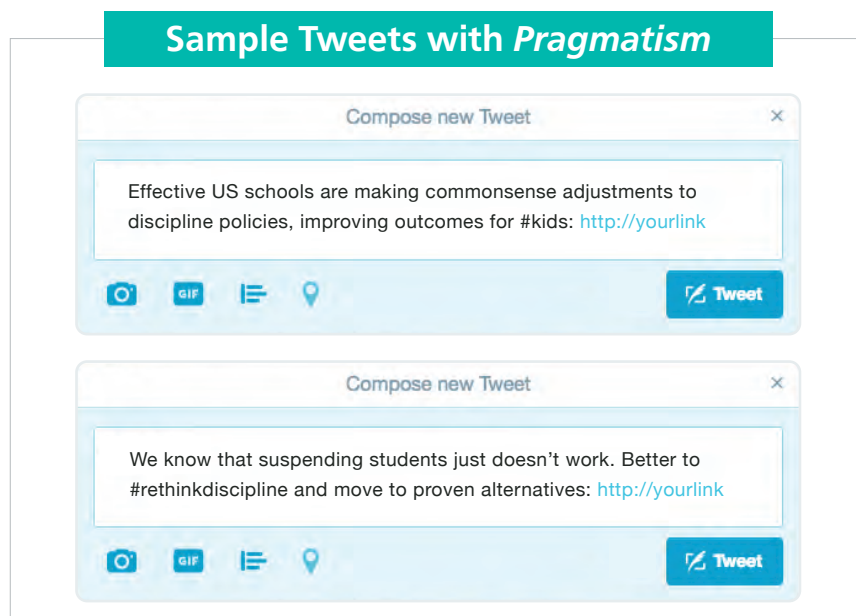
The frame element of Values helps to establish **why an issue matters** and **what is at stake** for society. Leading with a Value guides your audience’s decision-making process and orients readers toward supporting the solutions you want to advance. Some Values shift public opinion in more productive ways than others.

When drafting communications materials about the subject of school discipline, always start with the Value of **Pragmatism**: the idea that we should take a

commonsense, step-by-step approach to making sure that our school policies work to create a safe, positive learning environment for all students. **Pragmatism** positions school discipline reform as necessary, practical, and feasible, building the public’s sense of efficacy (or “can-do” attitudes) about needed changes to discipline practices and policies. It marginalizes exclusionary discipline as ineffective and outdated.

If communications are aligned with the recommendation to **lead with common sense**, then they are not **leading with race**. Here’s why: Without framing that can dislodge dominant assumptions about why racial disparities exist and persist, introducing race can do more harm than good. Across numerous studies on different social issues, FrameWorks research has repeatedly found that Americans of **diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds** tend to explain outcomes in terms of personal choice, character, and willpower. Thus, the public interprets racial disparities as evidence of poor choices by people of color.

Recommendation in action:



The Results behind the Recommendation:

Effects of Values on knowledge and attitudes.

In a study that tested the effects of different Values on public thinking about school discipline, **Pragmatism** turned out to boost public support for reform more than other frames.



11. Highlight structural solutions that go beyond “training” and “awareness.”

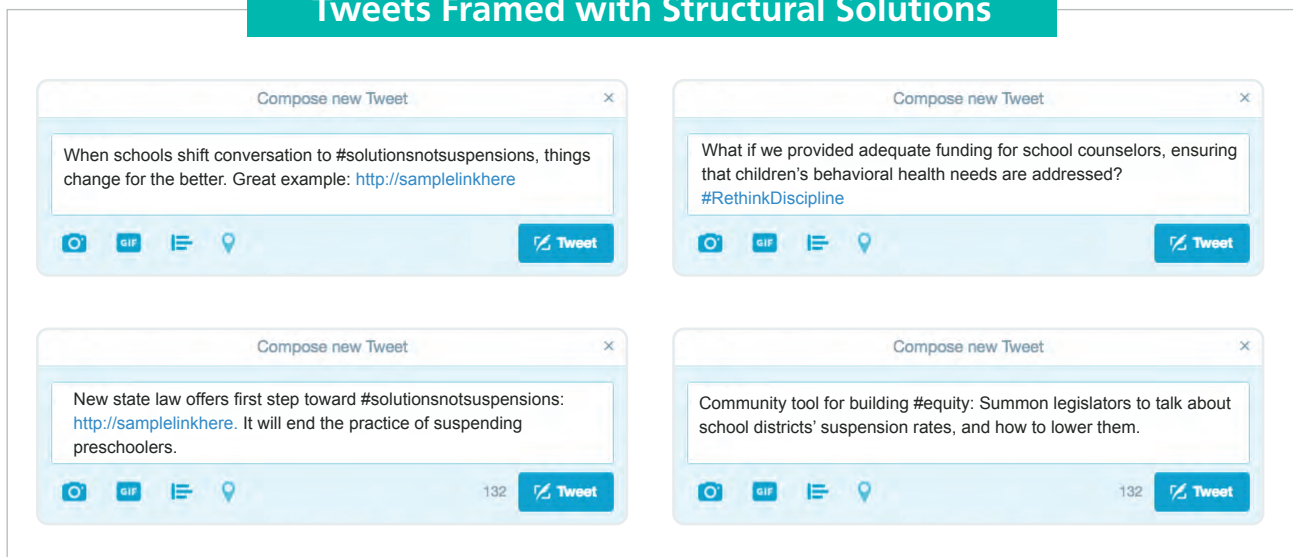
Educator training is certainly part of a comprehensive approach to more just, equitable, and supportive school climates, but it isn't the only reform needed. Whenever possible, therefore, communications should highlight policies and approaches other than “building awareness and skills.” This is because the public rarely receives information about approaches to solving social problems beyond “better information for making better decisions.”

In turn, this narrow discourse on the resolution of social problems has at least two unproductive frame effects. First, it can reinforce individualistic thinking that limits public policy options to “fixing people” rather than a more systemic perspective that foregrounds the need to “fix conditions.” Second, when those who already care about the problem hear only about solutions that seem far too small to make a difference on widespread injustice, then this constituency can fall prey to fatalistic thinking. The sense that the problem can't or won't be solved leaves them less likely to engage on the issue.

To create an ever-widening circle of constituencies who are not only supportive and informed but also ready to mobilize around an issue, advocates should highlight an ever-widening repertoire of concrete and creative solutions. The most effective solution stories include an explanation of the mechanism or “effectiveness factors” that characterize the highlighted approach, so that the public can generalize from the example.

Recommendation in action:

Tweets Framed with Structural Solutions



12. When talking about the connections between student behavior and mental health, use Toxic Stress to position the issue.

Advocates are increasingly connecting the research base on trauma and trauma-informed practice to the topic of school climate and behavior management in school settings. This may seem to be a promising direction for policy and practice, but it is fraught with communications challenges. FrameWorks research on public thinking about child mental health has consistently documented that assumptions about personal accountability and control shape understandings of the effects of adversity, as this quote from a research participant illustrates:

“In my opinion, I think a lot of it [poor mental health] stems from the lack of holding yourself accountable. Instead of taking responsibility for yourself, for your actions, for your words, for whatever’s going on in your life. Just because you’re on the Titanic, and it’s sinking, doesn’t mean that you have to have a bad outlook on things. There were people on the Titanic who determined, no matter what, that they were gonna survive somehow. They didn’t know how it was gonna happen. That’s an extreme situation, but I think that everyone has a choice.”

Reasoning this way, the public finds it difficult to appreciate the need for specialized interventions built on scientific insights into how trauma or adversity affect behavior and mental health.

To address this challenge, FrameWorks developed the metaphor **Three Types of Stress** with the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. This taxonomy translates scientific insights about how severe and chronic stress in early childhood can derail healthy development. It foregrounds biological mechanisms, explaining how unbuffered stress can send the body’s stress systems into “high alert” and keep them there, with negative effects on health, cognition, and other aspects of functioning. This information makes it more difficult to fall back on default thinking about individual choice or characteristics. This frame element is now in widespread use, with the term appearing frequently in policy, media, and advocacy communications.

HOW TO TALK ABOUT TOXIC STRESS IN SCHOOLS

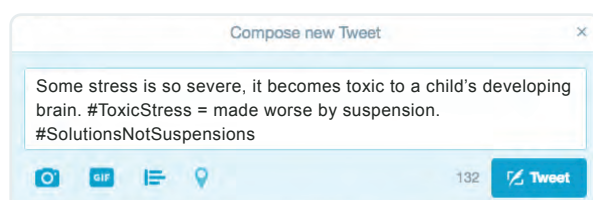
“Chronic, severe stressors can put the body’s stress systems on permanent ‘high alert,’ affecting the way people respond to situations such as conflict, worry, or fear. When children have experienced this kind of ‘Toxic Stress,’ then their behavior in school can be affected. There are really effective options for working with these kinds of students, but suspending or expelling them tends to make matters worse.”

THE RESULTS BEHIND THE RECOMMENDATION

FrameWorks researchers adapted **Toxic Stress** to focus on why children who have experienced adversity are more likely to have behavioral problems, and how exclusionary discipline practices make things worse. In on-the-street interviews, this Explanatory Metaphor proved to be an especially “sticky,” or memorable, way to talk about the effects of trauma and its implications for policy and practice. Analysis of this qualitative data showed that **Toxic Stress** is an effective way explain the specific problems surrounding exclusionary discipline for students who have experienced childhood trauma.

Recommendation in action:

Sample Tweets



Research Note

The Evidence Base for These Recommendations:

What does it mean for a frame to “work”? Strategic Frame Analysis® defines an effective frame as one that builds a more accurate and complete understanding of an issue and allows ordinary citizens to better evaluate evidence-based policy proposals. To identify the frames that invite the public into expert conversations, FrameWorks uses an experimental design that compares the effect of different messages on the knowledge, attitudes, and policy preferences of engaged citizens. The design randomly assigns a nationally representative sample of Americans to messages that are framed differently and compares their answers to survey items to the answers of a control group that receives no priming message. This sound experimental design allows researchers to feel confident that any differences in groups’ responses are due to the framing of the issue, and not due to their prior opinions or other factors.

To identify effective ways to increase public understanding of the problems associated with exclusionary discipline and the potential of alternative approaches, FrameWorks conducted an experiment that queried 4,100 Americans. The experiment was designed to reveal the most effective ways of achieving the following communications goals:

- Increased understanding of how exclusionary discipline leads to negative outcomes
- Increased support for ending the use of exclusionary discipline in all but extreme cases
- Increased understanding of how supportive discipline leads to improved outcomes
- Increased support for alternative discipline approaches, such as restorative justice
- Increased understanding of the negative outcomes caused by the intersection of school discipline and the juvenile justice system
- Increased support for limiting the contact students have with police in schools
- Increased understanding of implicit bias as a cause of racial disparities in discipline

One frame element that was tested was *Values*, or principles that orient people to why an issue matters to society and what is at stake. To select which Values to test, researchers looked at messages currently in use in the fields of education and criminal justice reform and developed hypotheses based on FrameWorks research into how the public understands student behavior. The experiment tested three Values: *Human Potential*, *Opportunity for All*, and *Pragmatism*.

Another frame element that was tested was *Explanatory Chains*, or short cause-and-effect sequences that clearly illustrate what affects what, and to what end. The experiment investigated the effects of four different Explanatory Chains:

exclusionary discipline, supportive discipline, police presence in schools, and implicit bias. A fifth condition was also tested that crossed two issues, pairing an explanation of implicit bias with an explanation of how police presence in schools tends to escalate punishments.

Selected results from these experiments are embedded in this playbook. In addition, the recommendations draw on previous research on child and youth development, education, racial disparities, and criminal and juvenile justice systems. Findings from nearly 200 other studies conducted by the FrameWorks Institute were re-analyzed with attention to their implications for the specific issue of school discipline.



When communicating with the public or policymakers, communicators are encouraged to borrow the language in this playbook verbatim, or to adapt the examples as needed. No citations or special permissions are needed for these public-facing applications. For other uses of playbook materials—such as incorporating these materials into trainings or other communications resources—please refer to the FrameWorks Institute’s website to see the terms of use and guidance on seeking permissions.

Suggested citation:

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Endnotes

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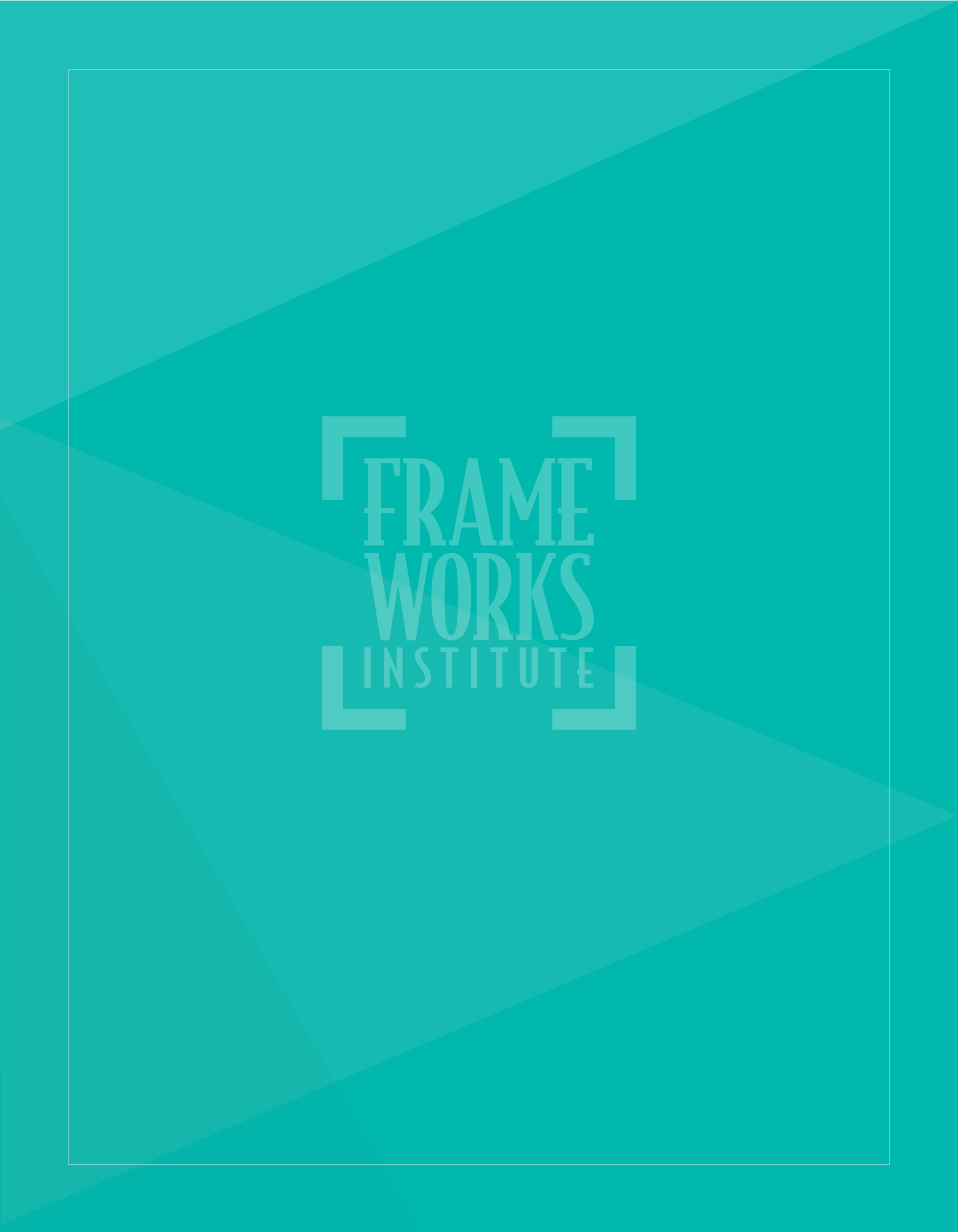
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For more on the extensive research base that informs the recommendations in this playbook, please visit our website at www.FrameWorksInstitute.org.



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