

FROM CARING TO CONDITIONS

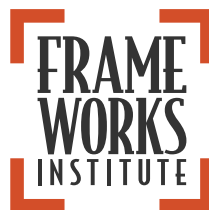
Strategies For Effectively Communicating About Family, School, And Community Engagement

A FrameWorks Framing Brief

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Introduction: Move from *Caring* to a *Conditions for Family, School, and Community Engagement frame*

In recent years, an expanding set of stakeholders has come to realize the importance of family, school, and community engagement (hereafter referred to as engagement)—the varied ways in which the adults in a child’s life interact with the child, and with each other, to support that child’s development and achievement. Engagement between these agents is critical to the success of the education system and in building equitable communities. There is wide-ranging agreement that better policies at the school, district, state, and federal levels are required to promote engagement. Yet getting these messages across to the public, education practitioners, and policymakers has proven challenging. There is a frustrating paradox: the idea of engagement is deeply familiar to the public, but at the same time, the solutions being proposed by experts and advocates seem foreign and ill-advised. How can claims about something so familiar seem so outlandish?

The answer lies in people’s implicit assumptions about engagement. People hold a *narrow* conception of family and school engagement and think of engagement in *interpersonal* rather than institutional or strategic terms. They assume that engagement involves occasional parent–teacher conferences and

meetings to deal with behavioral or academic problems. In short, people see engagement as a limited set of activities where success depends on personal motivation and caring. From this perspective, failures in engagement are seen as personal failures, rather than institutional challenges. Community engagement is completely off the radar, as is the role of engagement in addressing inequities. With this current lack of understanding, the claim that engagement has the power to transform educational and community outcomes, and so should be supported at an institutional level, may seem like wild overstatements.

In this MessageBrief, we outline a reframing strategy that broadens people's understanding of family, school, and engagement, explains the conditions that promote engagement and the importance of leveraging the assets of all adults in a child's life, and demonstrates how engagement can improve outcomes at every level. A framing strategy that forefronts the *Conditions for Engagement* shifts people's thinking, and enables an understanding of what engagement entails, why it matters, and how it can be facilitated. The *Conditions for Engagement* frame can be used through an integrated series of choices about which values, metaphors, and messengers to use.

The framing strategy weaves together three strands:

1. Orient toward **equity**: Couple an inclusive vision of opportunity with a grounded diagnosis of current inequity.
2. Explain the role of **context**: Show how institutional factors—formal programs and policies—can alternatively prevent or promote engagement.
3. Illustrate the **transformative power** of engagement: Help people see the scope and depth of the benefits of engagement and how it transforms the education system and communities.

These three strands animate the reframing strategy and run through the specific recommendations outlined below. By consistently pointing to the conditions necessary for family, school, and community partnerships, communicators can broaden their understanding of what engagement involves and help people recognize the importance of policy in better supporting it. By demonstrating how standard practices make engagement difficult, if not impossible, for many families, communicators can orient people toward equity and help people see what kinds of programs and policies are needed. Clearly showing *how* equitable engagement can improve outcomes for everyone in a community builds support for robust changes to the educational system.

Each of these framing moves makes a difference on its own, but, woven together, they become a powerful and comprehensive framing strategy that centers engagement as a critical component of childhood development and student success.

Key research questions to address in reframing family, school, and engagement

- **What does the research on family, school, and engagement say?** To distill expert consensus on family, school, and engagement, FrameWorks researchers conducted interviews from December 2016 to February 2017 with 13 leading family, school, and engagement experts. These data were supplemented by a review of relevant academic and advocacy literature, and refined during a feedback session with stakeholders in the field.
- **How do members of the public, education practitioners, and policymakers think?** FrameWorks researchers conducted in-depth cognitive interviews and analyzed the resulting transcripts to identify the implicit, shared understandings and assumptions that structure thinking among members of the public, education practitioners and policymakers. Ten interviews with members of the public were conducted in Charleston, South Carolina and Chicago, Illinois. Researchers also conducted phone interviews with education practitioners from preschool through grade 12 in Mississippi, North Dakota, and Maryland. In addition, 10 interviews were conducted with federal and state-level policymakers by phone.
- **Which frames shift thinking?** To identify effective ways of framing family, school, and engagement, FrameWorks researchers developed and tested a set of candidate messages. Three primary methods were used to explore and refine possible reframes:
 - On-the-street interviews involving rapid, face-to-face testing of frames and framing strategies for their ability to prompt productive discussions about family, school, and community engagement. A total of 49 interviews were conducted in April and May 2018.
 - A series of experimental surveys, involving a nationally representative sample of 5,103 respondents, that tested the effectiveness of a variety of frames on public understanding, attitudes, and support for policies.
 - A series of qualitative, group-based tests with a total of 72 people (36 education practitioners and 36 members of the public) to explore how the frames that emerged from the research described above worked in conversational settings.

All told, more than 5,300 people from across the United States were included in this research. See the Appendix for a more detailed methods discussion.

Anticipating public thinking

Before designing communications on a complex social issue, communicators need to know how and why communications might go awry. When people don't know much about how an issue works, advocates need framing strategies that can build conceptual understanding quickly and accurately. When strong understandings do exist but are at odds with research and evidence, advocates need strategies that can shift perspectives. A systematic assessment of where, and how, public thinking differs from expert consensus enables communicators to better understand how to deploy a framing strategy and to select tactics. In this section, FrameWorks offers its analysis of the most important challenges that emerge from non-experts' existing understandings of engagement.¹

The public's understanding of engagement is narrow. Experts explain that engagement consists of continuous and consistent interaction between the adults in a child's life, through a variety of practices and channels, to support children's development and achievement. They emphasize that communication between adults in children's lives needs to happen regularly throughout the year and not just when problems arise. In other words, engagement involves robust, varied, and ongoing forms of interaction.

When thinking about how and when families engage with schools, members of the public think of limited activities like parent-teacher conferences or receiving information from teachers about a child's homework. More significant interaction is assumed only to happen—and only to be necessary—if there are serious problems with children's behavior or performance.

The public and practitioners do not recognize the role of institutions in cultivating engagement. Experts emphasize that engagement depends on systemic measures and institutional contexts that facilitate ongoing and regular interaction. For example, regular home visits between teachers and parents throughout the school year ensure that family and school interaction is regular and occurs in the community in a setting other than the school.

Members of the public and education practitioners, by contrast, see engagement in highly personal terms that obscure the role of policies and practices. They assume that engagement depends on how much the adults in a child's life—especially parents and teachers—"care." If engagement is seen as an

outgrowth of personal, intrinsic characteristics, it becomes difficult for people to see how it can be intentionally fostered through well-structured programs and strategic policies.

This lack of institutional thinking helps explain a related challenge: engagement is largely off people's radar. This can be traced to people's narrow and highly personalized understanding of engagement. If engagement is only understood as episodic one-on-one interactions between parents and teachers, it becomes difficult to imagine how or why other community members should be involved, or how that could even happen.

The link to equity is unclear. Experts argue that current practices around engagement are inequitable because they do not address the linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic barriers that prevent engagement for some. They emphasize the need for specific practices that address these barriers so that *all* families and communities can engage. If these practices are adopted, engagement can be a vital tool for advancing equity and ultimately closing the achievement gap. When teachers and school leaders are actively engaged with families and communities, it helps them address their own biases, recognize the assets that families and communities bring to children's education, and incorporate culturally-relevant practices into teaching and programs.

Members of the public and practitioners frequently assume that differences in engagement are the product of families' and communities' "cultures," rather than the lack of inclusive engagement practices. In particular, people tend to think that, when lower-income families do not engage, it is the product of a "culture of poverty" that devalues education. This way of thinking draws on and reinforces racial and socioeconomic stereotypes and results in fatalistic thinking about reaching disadvantaged and marginalized families. When people think in this way, it prevents them from making the connection between engagement and equity. If differences in engagement are seen as the result of cultural differences rather than systemic ones, it becomes all too easy to see that assume that some families "can never be reached".

The public cannot see the broader impacts of engagement. Experts emphasize that family, school, and engagement benefits everyone involved—not only students, but also parents, teachers, and the community more broadly. Engagement strengthens families by connecting them with community resources and new social networks. It helps schools by improving teacher satisfaction, school climate, and school performance. And it strengthens communities by forging stronger connections between families, schools, and communities, and helps to create more engaged citizens.

Public thinking about the benefits of engagement is generally limited to benefits to students: people recognize that, when families are engaged, it can help students academically. People typically do *not* recognize the benefits to other parties. Instead, people often see intensive forms of engagement as an extra

burden on already overburdened teachers, or yet another thing for busy parents to worry about. In other words, people think of engagement as something that makes teachers' and parents' lives harder, not as something that benefits them and the student.

Advocates and communicators face additional challenges when they are talking about engagement involving families of young children. The following patterns of thinking will further complicate communicating about the importance of family engagement in early childhood.

Parents are responsible for children's outcomes.

The public generally thinks that child development and children's outcomes depend, above all else, on parents. According to this way of thinking, early development happens in the home, under the purview of parents, and is beyond the influence of contextual and environmental factors. This model also obscures the environmental conditions, supports, and relationships in addition to the family that affect children's outcomes, and undermines support for societal factors that promote healthy development.

The science of brain development is a mystery.

FrameWorks has found, across a wide body of research,² that members of the public don't understand the process of early childhood development. When asked, people often say that children develop "automatically," following "natural" trajectories of physical growth and maturation. The process and mechanisms by which development happens is a "black box" for members of the public, i.e. they are largely misunderstood and poorly articulated. As a result, people don't consider the contingent nature of development or the importance of positive environments and experiences and stable, supportive, and responsive relationships. Instead, people assume that "normal" and "good" development happens on its own.³ When people draw on this model, promoting family, school and engagement to foster healthy development is hard to understand and difficult to support. After all, why intervene to support a process that happens on its own?

Early education is fancy babysitting.

Preschool is seen as having social and entertainment value but little *educational* value, which derails discussions about the full value of early education. If social skills develop naturally—regardless of whether children attend preschool—then people won't understand the value of preschool and will be less likely to invest in policies and programs that support engagement between families, preschools, and communities. People *do* understand that kids start school at different

developmental levels, but they believe that kids’ “starting points” are determined either by their innate ability or by their home environment, which they see as shaped and constructed exclusively by parents.

In addition to the strategies necessary to build public understanding of engagement at any age, in the section below, we suggest framing strategies that boost public awareness about the importance of Family, School, and Community Engagement (FSCE) from birth to adulthood, increase public understanding of how it works, and facilitate more productive public thinking about the kinds of social and structural supports that can improve engagement in the early years. Most importantly, they convey that FSCE in pre-kindergarten (pre-K) education is a matter of broad public concern that offers significant opportunities and potential benefits for us all.

Framing recommendations

The research presented below suggests that, to build support for the policies that promote engagement, communicators should use a *Conditions of Engagement* frame. This frame is woven from three strands:

1. **Orient towards equity.** Communicators must highlight how typical engagement practices often exclude low-income families, families of color, non-English-speaking families, and others. At the same time, communicators should paint a picture of what more equitable engagement looks like and how it can be achieved.
2. **Explain the role of context.** To counter personalized understanding of engagement and build support for policy change, communicators need to show how conditions shape engagement. In other words, communicators must explain how institutional factors can alternatively prevent or promote engagement.
3. **Illustrate the transformative power of engagement.** Effective framing requires explaining how ongoing and regular engagement can transform the educational system and the community. Helping people see the scope and depth of the benefits of engagement leads to a recognition that it should be consistently prioritized.

The recommendations below offer concrete ways of executing the *Conditions for Engagement* frame. These recommendations should not be understood as isolated tactics, but rather as an interwoven strategy. For example, orienting people toward equity means explaining how institutions currently impede engagement for some families. At the same time, when communicators can show, in very concrete ways and through specific examples, *how* engagement promotes equity in schools and communities, they can help people see its transformative power.

In presenting the specific recommendations, we consistently return to the larger *Conditions for Engagement* frame and the threads that constitute this frame. We do this so that communicators can see the underlying commonalities that tie the recommendations together and explain why they work. By understanding these common threads, communicators can more flexibly adapt and apply these recommendations.

FrameWorks researchers designed a series of qualitative studies and quantitative experiments that tested the effectiveness of different frame elements in communicating about family, school, and engagement. The frame elements tested included explanatory metaphors, values, examples, and messengers.

Qualitative studies tested the ways that certain frames related to family, school, and engagement effect perception and behavior. By exploring how participants used the language of particular messages, and analyzing changes in talk, researchers were able to differentiate between more- and less-effective frames, and to identify the specific features of messages that were most productive.

The survey experiments quantitatively tested frames using a large, nationally representative sample. To test frames in this experiment, researchers created a short description of a fictional policy initiative, which was given to participants in a control condition. Researchers then embedded frames into this description, which were given to “treatment” groups. Participants in the experiment were randomly assigned to the control or to a message treatment group, and were asked to complete a survey probing their knowledge, attitudes, and policy preferences about issues related to family, school, and engagement. In the experiment, a frame “works” when it leads to positive shifts in these outcomes. Sample survey questions are provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Desired communications outcomes—knowledge, attitudes, and policy preferences

SCALES	SAMPLE QUESTIONS	ANSWERS
Support for Sample Legislation	How much more would you be willing to pay in taxes so that the Family, School and Community Engagement Act could be adopted?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nothing; • A small amount; • A moderate amount; • A large amount; • A very large amount
Policy Support	How much do you favor or oppose tying funding to the successful development of a plan to build family engagement into all curricula and activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly oppose; • Oppose; • Somewhat oppose; • Neither favor nor oppose; • Somewhat favor; • Favor; • Strongly favor

SCALES	SAMPLE QUESTIONS	ANSWERS
Understanding of Best Practices in Family Engagement	Teachers should have contact with every student's family each and every week.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly disagree; • Disagree; • Slightly disagree; • Neither agree nor disagree; • Slightly agree; • Agree; • Strongly agree
Equity	Schools should translate materials for families into different languages to make sure all families can engage, even though this costs money.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly disagree; • Disagree; • Slightly disagree; • Neither agree nor disagree; • Slightly agree; • Agree; • Strongly agree
Understanding of Effects of Family Engagement	Please complete the following. When teachers are required to spend time meeting and communicating with parents, this...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improves teaching by enhancing teachers' understanding of students' needs; • Improves teaching by helping teachers identify problem children early on; • Harms teachers by taking time away from lesson planning
Priority of Family Engagement	Please rank the following educational priorities in order of importance, from most important at the top, to least important at the bottom.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family engagement; • Arts education; • Foreign language instruction; • Social and emotional learning; • Standardized test preparation; • Sports; • Music education
Collective Efficacy	In your view, how realistic is it that all families can be engaged in their students' education?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not at all realistic; • Slightly realistic; • Somewhat realistic; • Moderately realistic; • Very realistic
Understanding of Community Engagement	When schools build strong relationships with community organizations, how much of an effect, if any, do you think this has on students' learning and academic achievement?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No effect; • A small effect; • A moderate effect; • A large effect; • A very large effect
Understanding of Bridging Learning Environments	How important do you think it is that all of the places where children might learn—such as home, schools, museums, libraries, daycares, and summer camps—have strong relationships with one another?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not at all important; • A little important; • Moderately important; • Very important; • Extremely important

Researchers compared survey answers from the control and treatment groups to determine how frames affect thinking. In the analysis, researchers controlled for a range of demographic variables (including age, race, class, and gender of participants) by conducting a multiple regression analysis to assure that the effects observed were driven by the frames rather than demographic variations in the sample. A breakdown of the sample by demographics is included in the Appendix.

An important note on the results of the survey experiment: an additional analysis of the data, broken down by race/ethnicity, income, and education, demonstrated that the recommended frames worked positively across all categories. Although there was some variation within groups (in terms of the extent of the increase in understanding and support for programs and policies in response to the recommended frames), in every case, the measured effects were positive. However, because different groups of respondents were exposed to each treatment, the sample for any particular demographic subgroup was relatively low in each condition. As a result, most measurable shifts among demographic subgroups did not rise to the level of statistical significance. The footnotes indicate the cases where frames did achieve statistically significant results for particular subgroups.

Recommendation: Use the *Space Launch* metaphor to build understanding of engagement as systematic interaction, coordination and communication.

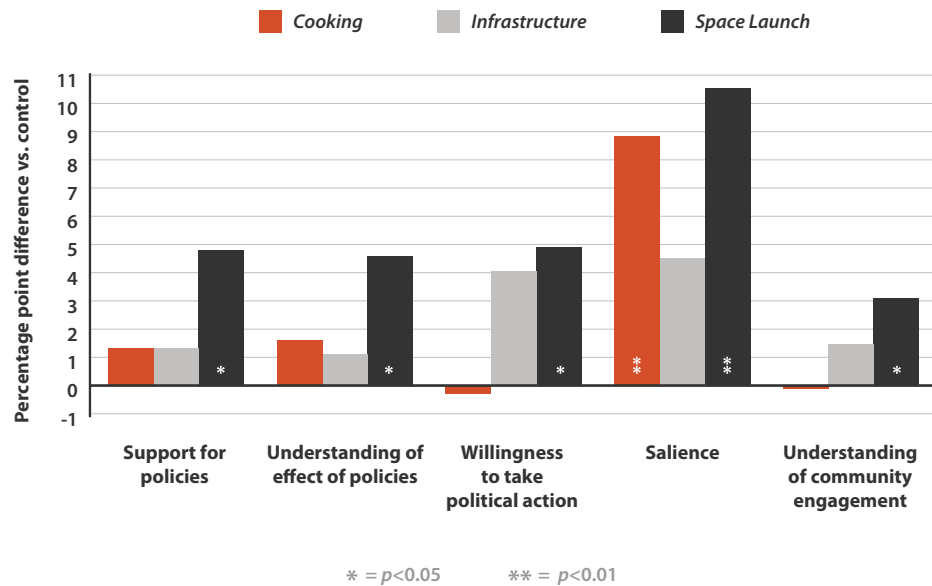
Space Launch is an explanatory metaphor that helps people see the essential and purposeful components of family, school, and engagement, explains how it works, and expands appreciation for programs and initiatives that support it. Its power lies in the way that components of the metaphor map onto family, school, and engagement. Here's the idea:

Just as a space launch relies on a team of people working together to plan and complete a mission, families, schools, and communities can work together to launch children's learning. This involves planning successful learning by collaborating at the start of the school year. And when families, schools, and communities work together throughout the year on their shared mission, student learning takes off.

FrameWorks tested a number of different metaphors that explained family, school, and engagement in both on-the-street interviews and in a large-scale survey experiment. Of all of these, *Space Launch* proved the most effective.*

* The *Space Launch* metaphor demonstrated positive results across all demographic groups and showed statistically significant shifts in thinking among lower-income participants, in particular an increase in the salience of engagement.

Figure 1: Effects of explanatory metaphors



Compared to survey respondents in the control group, people who were exposed to the *Space Launch* metaphor expressed greater support for policies that promote engagement and demonstrated better understanding of the effects of these policies. In addition, the *Space Launch* metaphor increased participants’ willingness to engage in political action related to engagement, such as signing a petition, increased understanding of the salience or importance of engagement, and increased people’s understanding of the importance of community involvement in engagement.

A difference of 3 to 10 percent in survey responses is a large effect, and the strength of this metaphor in shifting understanding and support in comparison to the other metaphors is noteworthy. Even though participants were exposed to messages for only a brief amount of time, the *Space Launch* message produced significant changes in how people understand engagement, and their willingness to support policy change. Importantly, *Cooking* and *Infrastructure* did not show the same positive effects as *Space Launch*. *Space Launch* also showed productive effects in qualitative testing with members of the public and practitioners.

What it does

Qualitative studies give us insight into why *Space Launch*, and particularly the “mission control” concept embedded in the metaphor, is so effective. Because there are various roles and responsibilities involved in launching spaceships, people can easily connect how various actors need to work together to ensure successful family engagement and to advance student success. The metaphor creates space to identify and name actors that people may not automatically connect to family engagement.

The metaphor also emphasizes the importance of coordination and ongoing communication among various actors. People understand that successful “missions” require that all actors consistently and regularly communicate with one another, and that they coordinate how each of their jobs contributes to the overall mission. This aspect of the metaphor expands people’s sense that engagement should not be confined to episodic interactions during certain times of the year or during points of crisis. Instead, it focuses attention on how engagement must involve intentionality and planning that happens through regular interaction.

Space Launch draws attention to the idea that specific environments facilitate communication between families, schools and community members, and requires planning, implementation and intentional partnerships. By comparing engagement to a context where people understand that success depends on systematized communication, the metaphor deepens understanding that engagement is advanced or impeded by specific institutional environments. It shuts down the idea that engagement depends solely on the individual characteristics of the actors involved, or that it emerges organically via personal relationships.

Finally, *Space Launch* focuses attention on the idea that engagement has a specific goal and purpose—to improve outcomes for students. People understand that experts work together to successfully complete a mission, and they can compare this goal to improving student learning.

Because of these effects, *Space Launch* establishes two threads of the larger *Conditions for Engagement* frame. It shows how environments can facilitate engagement. By focusing attention on children’s development and learning as the outcome of engagement, it points to one aspect of its transformative power.

Here are more specific recommendations that amplify the metaphor’s potential to shift understanding and support:

- **Use *Space Launch* to bring community into the discussion.** Communicators should take advantage of the fact that *Space Launch* makes room for thinking about engagement. By mapping community onto a specific type of actor who helps launch student success, the metaphor concretizes the idea of community as a partner. This heightens the visibility of the community involvement in engagement.
- **Emphasize early and often.** Talk about how engagement can “launch” childhood development and should start early in preschool or daycare, and underscore that engagement in early childhood is the beginning of an ongoing collaboration between families, schools, and communities. Communicators should emphasize that starting engagement in early childhood can set shared expectations for family–school partnerships before children reach elementary school.

- **Encourage creativity.** When communicators are in contexts that involve more interaction with audiences, they can provide space for people to work creatively with the metaphor. *Space Launch* is a rich metaphor, providing communicators with a range of words and images that powerfully convey what engagement looks like, why it's important, how it works, and what can be done to make it work better.

Even small doses of *Space Launch* work. Qualitative research showed that even a small dose of the metaphor helps move non-expert thinking in the right direction. Starting communications with phrases like “engagement launches student achievement”, or referring to the metaphor in a tweet broadens understanding of engagement and how it works:

It's #Back2School time, which means it's time for families, schools, and communities to come together to coordinate student learning—like mission control getting ready for a space launch. Prepare for learning takeoff!

Recommendation: Frame family, school, and engagement as a way to achieve opportunity for all.

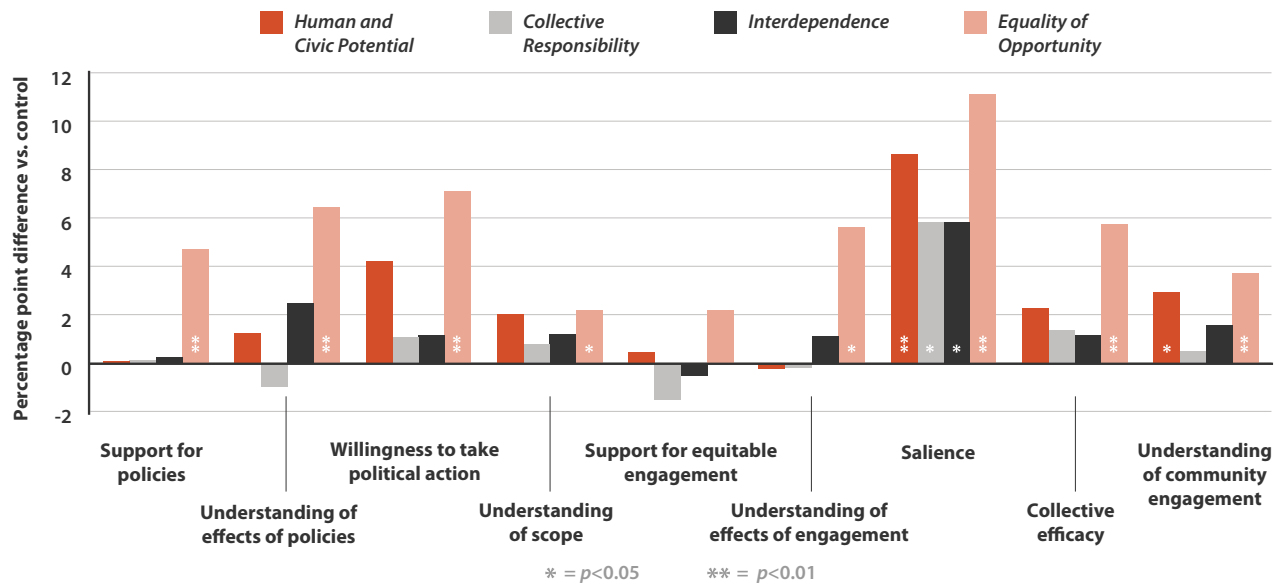
As noted above, orienting engagement messages towards equity means pairing a grounded diagnosis of current inequity with an inclusive vision of opportunity. The value of *Opportunity for All* accomplishes these tasks and powerfully orients audiences to the idea that engagement must be inclusive and available to all. The value helps people see that engagement strengthens opportunities for healthy development and student achievement for all children, regardless of background, and explains why some children can be excluded from these opportunities.**

Here is the core of the value:

We are committed to making sure that all families have opportunities to engage, regardless of the color of their skin, how much money they have, or the language they speak at home. Children's learning is strengthened and supported when families, schools, and communities engage with each other in a regular and ongoing way.

** The *Opportunity for All* value had statistically significant results among non-white respondents across a number of measures, including understanding of the effects of engagement, support for engagement policies, and willingness to pay higher taxes to support engagement in schools.

Figure 2: Effects of values



The graph shows that the *Opportunity for All* message is an effective way of framing the importance of family, school, and engagement. Compared to people in the control group who read unframed information about policies that promote engagement, people who read the same information within a message framed by the value of *Opportunity for All* expressed higher levels of support for, as well as a better understanding of policies that promote family engagement, a higher likelihood of taking political action in support of policies promoting family engagement, and expressed a more positive understanding of engagement. All of these differences were statistically significant compared to the control group.^{***} There were no statistically significant differences in responses between the control group and any of the other values-based messages tested. Furthermore, although *Interdependence* worked well among education practitioners (see below), it did not have the same effects among members of the public.

Opportunity for All also worked well in qualitative testing with practitioners. For example, it helped practitioners recognize that engagement offers opportunities to all students while drawing attention to the idea that engagement is a means of ensuring more equitable outcomes. It focused practitioners' attention on the impacts of poverty on educational attainment, channeling their discussions to the idea that engagement is one way to improve educational outcomes for all children.

^{***} This value also demonstrated statistically significant results in support of engagement policies among lower-income respondents.

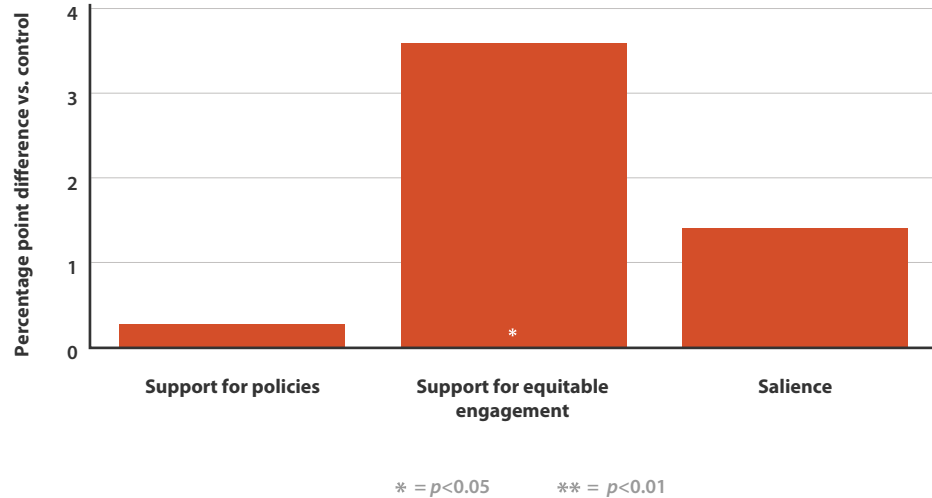
Opportunity for All builds on people’s deeply held idea that high-quality educational opportunities should be available for all children and in all communities, and positions engagement as an important educational opportunity. It simultaneously shows that opportunities for engagement promote student learning, thereby positioning engagement as a means to ensure more equitable outcomes. Results from the experiment suggest that the value helps people see that making opportunities for engagement available is a policy matter rather than one of low individual motivation or the deficient “cultural values” of certain groups. In this way, the *Opportunity for All* value forefronts an aspirational vision of more equitable access to engagement and also demonstrates its transformative power.

Recommendation: Use concrete examples to explain engagement practices that include all families, and how they address inequities.

Communicators can use concrete explanatory examples to build understanding of disparities in engagement and the importance of more inclusive practices. Whereas the *Opportunity for All* value sets up an aspirational vision of how engagement *should* happen in all communities, concrete examples explain *why* and *how* that vision is not being realized, and *what* needs to happen. Here’s an illustration of how examples can be used in these ways:

When families and schools engage with each other in a regular and ongoing way, it strengthens children’s learning. But there are barriers that make it hard for some families to engage with schools—for example, if school events are scheduled for times when parents can’t get away from work, or if parents and teachers don’t speak the same language, or don’t come from the same culture. To promote family engagement, schools need practices that allow all families to be involved, regardless of background or circumstances. For example, teachers can begin to overcome cultural barriers and establish relationships with families by visiting the homes of all their students at the beginning of the year. Schools can translate materials for non-English-speaking parents and hold events at different times of the day to allow families with different work hours to attend. By training teachers to understand the needs and goals of parents from different circumstances and backgrounds, schools can help overcome obstacles to engagement.

Results from the survey experiment show that this type of explanatory example is effective in increasing support for equitable engagement practices.

Figure 3: Effects of equity example

As the graph illustrates, receiving concrete examples of the obstacles to engagement, and of inclusive, equitable practices, increased support for equitable engagement relative to the control condition. In other words, receiving these examples led people to better understand the importance of adopting inclusive practices that enable *all* families to engage with schools by intentionally addressing racial, cultural, or linguistic barriers. The equity examples did not affect other outcomes.

The results indicate that equity examples serve a specific, but not surprising purpose: equity examples generate a deeper understanding of equity. On their own, these examples are insufficient to elevate the salience of the issue of family engagement and boost support for a broad policy agenda. But they are *critical* when communicators want to drill down on equity. The examples help people see that disparities in engagement aren't due to families or communities devaluing education or not caring enough about their children's education. Rather, examples build understanding that disparities result from systemic barriers that require systemic solutions.

It is important to highlight that the examples tested in the experiment included discussions of both the *obstacles* that impede engagement for disadvantaged groups and of *inclusive practices* that help to overcome these obstacles. Including both of these dimensions is critical when using examples. Because people tend to assume that disparities in engagement flow from deficits in families or communities, providing an alternative understanding of obstacles is vital to help people recognize why inclusive, equitable practices are needed. Combining these examples of inclusive practices with *Opportunity for All* underlines the urgency of overcoming these obstacles, and reinforces the power of inclusivity to transform the education system.

Recommendation: Use the value of *Interdependence* to help education practitioners see engagement as an ongoing partnership, and to bring engagement into view.

The value of *Interdependence* was effective in research with education practitioners. Its power lies in its ability to bring the broader context of engagement into view, enabling practitioners to recognize that engagement *depends* on policies that facilitate engagement, and that teachers and parents cannot and should not be left on their own to find productive ways to interact. *Interdependence* helps practitioners understand that engagement between teachers and parents can and should be supported by the school and community. Here's the core of the *Interdependence* value:

We all play a part and have a stake in the success of the children in our community. This is why we need to build strong connections between all families, our schools, and our community.

In qualitative testing, this value not only made engagement more salient for practitioners, but it prompted thinking about how “it takes a village” to support students as well as teachers. When practitioners used the value of *Interdependence* to think and talk about engagement, it widened their view beyond the parent–teacher dyad to include other school administration and staff, as well as members of the wider community. By widening practitioners’ perspectives, the value opened up thinking about the importance of engaging communities to support new opportunities for learning.

Interdependence helps practitioners situate the parent–teacher relationship within a broader context and, in so doing, helps practitioners see family engagement as *feasible*. Reasoning with this value, practitioners understand that the burden of engagement doesn't fall solely on teachers, and that effective engagement practices distribute that responsibility. *Interdependence* diverted practitioners *away* from thinking that engagement is just another unrealistic demand on their time, and thus inoculated against pushback.

The *Interdependence* value pushes practitioners to prioritize steps that schools can take to enable family and engagement. It therefore provides an important thread of the larger *Conditions of Engagement* frame. Namely, that certain kinds of institutional contexts make engagement more or less likely to occur.

Recommendation: Be explicit that engagement involves regular, ongoing interaction.

As noted above, early phases of the research demonstrated that people tend to think that engagement happens during certain points in the school year, or when problems reach a crisis point. In order to ensure that people have a broad sense of what engagement can and should be, all of the frames that

were tested in the experimental survey included a statement that explained that engagement is the ongoing, consistent and continuous interaction between schools, families, and communities. The frames also included concrete examples of when and how engagement can take place outside of school, such as home visits or gatherings in community centers. Without this additional information, researchers suspect that the frames would not have the same positive and productive effects.

This means that communicators should be explicit that engagement involves regular and ongoing interaction between families, schools, and communities, and provide concrete examples of what these interactions look like and accomplish. Below is one example of how to make this clear for non-expert audiences.

Our school district is committed to building strong connections between our families, our schools, and our community. That is why we have initiated regular gatherings throughout the year in our local community center, and everyone is invited. Teachers, families, and even community members who may not be directly involved in the school district, can work together to make sure children can fully develop their abilities and contribute to our community.

Making sure to define engagement as regular and ongoing represents a significant and powerful frame shift. Going from an episodic understanding of engagement to an ongoing one helps people see the power and potential of engagement to improve learning and development. When communicators consistently emphasize the ongoing nature of engagement, people understand that engagement represents a fundamentally different mode of interaction between schools, families, and communities. Simply defining engagement highlights its transformative power and strengthens an important thread in the overall framing strategy. When communicators can pierce through the idea that engagement is episodic and isolated, people can begin to imagine new ways of organizing learning environments that better facilitate frequent, diverse and meaningful interactions between families, schools and communities.

Communicating about early childhood requires additional framing work

In addition to the research conducted for this report, the Heising-Simons Foundation funded a *Framing Brief* to inform messaging efforts on family, school, and engagement in *early childhood*. These recommendations, based on the research described in this Framing Brief, and building on 20 years of research on early childhood development, provide an additional set of tools for advocates to use as they craft effective and aligned communications about engagement in early childhood. For a more extended discussion of how to frame engagement in early childhood, please see *Framing Family, School and Community Engagement in Early Childhood* at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

In order to frame engagement in early childhood, communicators need to accomplish four critical framing tasks:

1. Establish that early childhood is a critical period of development and learning.
2. Explain the process of development in a way that highlights interaction with responsive caregivers of all kinds.
3. Define what kinds of skills are developing during early childhood.
4. Explain that family engagement is a continuum that begins in early childhood and continues until adulthood. While it may look different in each age stage, there are also consistent messages that transcend age.

The following frame elements can help accomplish these framing tasks.

Recommendation: Use *Brain Architecture* and *Serve and Return* to establish that engagement can facilitate development and learning in the early years.

The *Brain Architecture* explanatory metaphor establishes that brains are built over time, and the metaphor of *Serve and Return* helps people understand that relationships with supportive caregivers are a critical part of the brain-building process. By describing how reciprocal interactions are the “active ingredients” that build the brain circuitry on which future learning and development are based, the metaphor opens space for people to understand the importance of engagement opportunities early on. These metaphors help inoculate against default assumptions that children’s development “simply happens.”⁴ This is similar to other recommendations in this report that suggest the importance of intentionality in planning for successful engagement.

Here is an example of how people can position engagement in a general discussion of early brain development:

We now know that supportive interactions literally shape the architecture of the developing brain. The active ingredient is the “serve and return” relationships with supportive caregivers—including parents, day care providers, and even community members like librarians. Family, school, and engagement is an essential building block of the brain’s development.

Recommendation: Use *Weaving Skills Ropes* to explain what develops in early childhood.

This metaphor, developed through FrameWorks’ research on education reform, helps people understand that skills development is an active, not passive, process. It also illustrates that cognitive, social, and emotional skills are integrated and mutually reinforcing, steering readers away from the assumption that social and emotional development have little relevance to cognitive and academic learning. When people have a more robust understanding of *what* develops during early childhood, it is easier for them to understand how engagement facilitates the development of various kinds of skills.

Learning is a process of weaving and using skills together. In order to learn, we need to weave together new social, emotional, and academic skills to do all the things we need to be able to do—solve problems, work with others, formulate and express our ideas, and make and learn from mistakes. Regular and ongoing opportunities for engagement between families, early learning environments, and the community can support this weaving process.

Once communicators build understanding that early childhood is a critical period of development, explain how development happens, and define what is developing during this period, they can pivot to the strategies outlined in this report to reframe family, school, and engagement. In this way, experts and advocates who are tasked with framing engagement in early childhood can improve public understanding of this critical developmental period while sharing consistent communication strategies with other advocates who are framing engagement during other developmental periods.

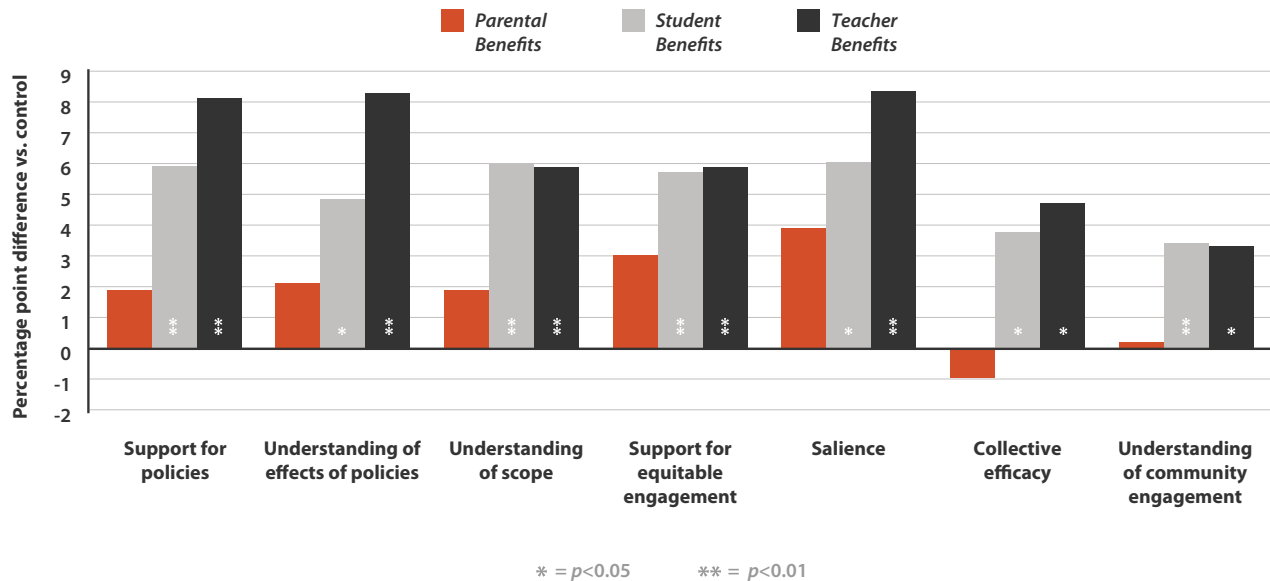
Recommendation: Foreground the benefits of engagement for teachers and students to elevate the issue.

Foregrounding the benefits of engagement for teachers and students is a highly effective way to increase the salience of the issue, deepen understanding of how engagement works, and build support for policies to promote engagement. In addition, the *Teacher Benefits* and *Student Benefits* frames increase support for equitable engagement practices. These frames are *much* more effective than a *Parental Benefits* frame that foregrounds how engagement helps parents (see below for how discussions of parental benefits can be successfully leveraged). Here's an example of the *Teacher Benefits* frame:

When families and schools engage with each other in a regular and ongoing way, teachers benefit. Strong family engagement improves teacher performance, because parents reinforce lessons at home. This can lead to increases in test scores, which reflect well on teachers and can lead to pay increases. And when families are engaged, this reinforces the importance of education, which improves students' attitudes towards school, and reduces behavioral problems—all of which makes teachers' jobs easier, and increases retention. Collaboration with families also increases the sense of community in schools and improves teacher satisfaction.

We can see just how effective the *Teacher Benefits* frame is by looking to the results of the survey experiment. As Figure 4 illustrates, this frame had large, statistically significant effects on a broad array of outcomes, including policy support, understanding the effects of policy, understanding the scope of engagement (what it involves in practice), support for equitable engagement, salience, collective efficacy, and understanding engagement. Strikingly, the frame produced effects over 8 percentage points—which represents a large effect for an experiment of this type—on three outcomes: policy support; understanding of the effects of policies; and salience. This frame's effectiveness stands in stark contrast to the *Parental Benefits* frame, which had no statistically significant effects.

Figure 4: Effects of benefits messages



Why does the *Teacher Benefits* frame work so well? While we do not have direct evidence that speaks to this, the *Teacher Benefits* frame likely works for two reasons:

1. It brings into view benefits that are ordinarily *out of sight*, and in so doing, stretches people’s thinking in productive ways.
2. It overcomes a source of worry about engagement—that it is yet another burden on already overtaxed teachers.

While the *Teacher Benefits* frame produced the largest effects in the survey experiment, Figure 4 shows that the *Student Benefits* frame also worked well, producing significant effects on the same outcomes as the *Teacher Benefits* frame. Here’s an example of the *Student Benefits* frame:

Students benefit from strong family engagement. Regular and ongoing engagement increases attendance rates and makes students more likely to graduate from high school because families are reinforcing the importance of education and the lessons students are learning in class. Engagement can even make it more likely that students go to college because of higher academic achievement. Ongoing, regular engagement also strengthens students’ relationships with their parents, because they see that their parents are committed to their education and success.

Whereas the *Teacher Benefits* frame works by countering worries and highlight benefits that were previously out of mind, the *Student Benefits* frame works by activating and building on the benefits of engagement that people already

see—those that accrue to students. In addition, the *Students* frame expands the already understood benefits of engagement by adding social benefits to students, like improving relationships with parents. And when this frame is coupled with a description of engagement as “regular and ongoing,” and is used as an argument for policies that systematically build family engagement into education, it helps people see that engagement practices should be expanded and made more robust.

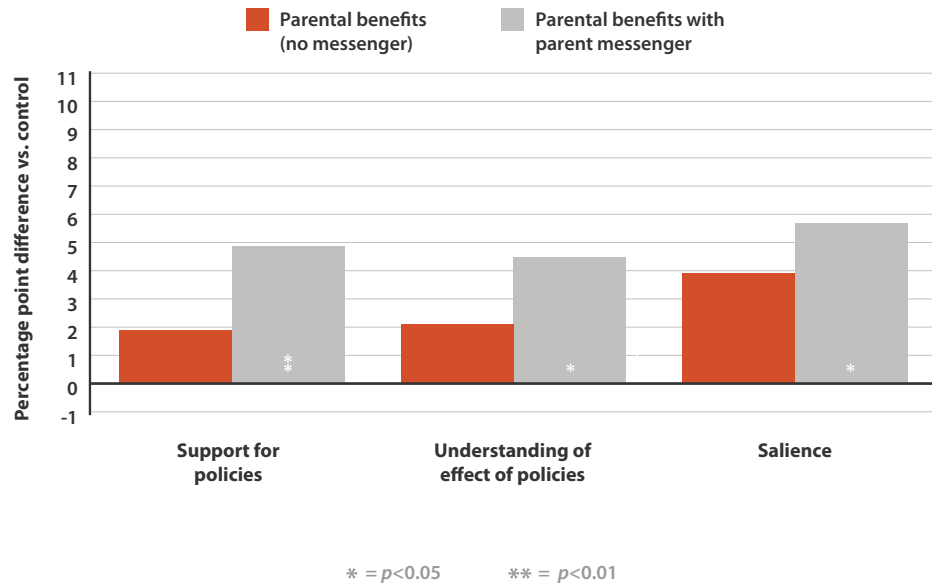
It is important to highlight that both the *Teacher Benefits* and *Student Benefits* frames were highly effective in increasing support for equitable engagement practices. We suspect that these frames boosted support for inclusive practices by helping people recognize the potential impact of these practices, and connecting these impacts to familiar educational actors. Rather than making a principled case for these practices, they made an instrumental one. The takeaway for communicators is that making an effective case for equitable practices does not simply—or primarily—require convincing people to care about equity as a principle. Rather, it requires demonstrating, in concrete terms, how the right policies and practices can help *all* students, and benefit all actors in the system.

The *Teacher Benefits* and *Student Benefits* frame not only orients people towards equity: by naming benefits that people already connect to engagement and expanding people’s understanding of the potential benefits, these frames demonstrate how engagement can transform educational experiences and improve outcomes for teachers and students alike.

Recommendation: Use parents as messengers when focusing on parental benefits.

While focusing on the benefits of engagement for teachers and students is a highly effective strategy, focusing on parents requires careful framing. Figure 5 shows that, when messages focus on parental benefits with no messenger, people’s understanding of the effects and support for policies, as well as their idea that engagement is a salient issue, is not significantly different than the control group. However, when that same message included a parent as a messenger, people’s support and understanding increased.

Figure 5: Talking about benefits for parents



These findings demonstrate that, when talking about the benefits of engagement for parents, communicators need to be sure to feature parents as the messenger. As noted above, people have a difficult time understanding how engagement will benefit parents. Furthermore, they cannot understand how engagement might benefit parents themselves. When parents explain the benefits of engagement, however, they can attest to the beneficial aspects of engagement, making the message more credible. Furthermore, when parents detail their experiences, it helps people understand that engagement is feasible.

When communicators can bring parental benefits into view, they can further advance the idea that engagement is transformative for all actors involved. As the field recruits and mobilizes parents to support and advocate for engagement in all communities, they should simultaneously equip parents to become visible spokespeople for the movement. It is important that parents situate their experiences within the larger *Conditions of Engagement* frame; they need to detail how institutions make engagement possible, focus on equity, and explain how engagement results in better outcomes for everyone.

From frame to message: an example of how to use the *Conditions of Engagement* frame

Press release: Home visits launch students learning

The Monroe School district has just launched a new initiative to boost students' learning through a new kindergarten home-visiting program at the Chavez school. The program increases teachers' pay and offers professional development credits so that teachers can spend time outside of school hours visiting kindergartners in their homes several times during the year. The goal of the program is to improve student learning by fostering greater coordination, collaboration and communication between parents and teachers. The program builds the "Mission Control center" that will make sure that all kindergartners' learning will blast off.

This initiative has already gotten very positive reviews from everyone who has been involved. Stacy Mellen, a teacher who is a part of the program reported: "I visited my new kindergartner, Josephine Suarez, before her first day of class. She was so excited when I came to her house and was very proud to show me her rock collection. I talked to the Suarez family about the science projects that we will be working on during the year, and we strategized about ways we might connect her love of geology to activities that will happen in the classroom. I did not know about Josephine's rock collection, and I left the visit with so many ideas about how to follow her interests!"

The initiative has been especially helpful for parents who do not have flexible work schedules. Diana Suarez, Josephine's mother, and also mother of a second grader in the same school, talked about the importance of flexibility: "It has been so difficult for me in the past to attend school events that happen during the day because I work multiple jobs and often do not know my work schedule until the beginning of the work week. Stacy offered several times that she could come over and worked around our schedule."

Mrs. Suarez explained that the home visit reduced Josephine's apprehension on the first day of school because she already met her new teacher. "To tell you the truth, I was less anxious as well," Mrs. Suarez admitted. "On the first day of school, she ran into the school yard, just ready to take off!"

"I feel so much more comfortable reaching out when I have questions about Josephine's time in school than I did when my older daughter started school. I even call Stacy by her first name; I have never done that with a teacher before!" During the visit, Ms. Mellen showed the Suarez family how to use the app she uses to communicate more easily with parents. The app also includes a list of upcoming

community events. “We are going to a school-sponsored rummage sale next week and I am planning to clear all of the baby items out of my basement, and hopefully connect with other parents in my neighborhood.” Mrs. Suarez said.

The school district wants you to become a part of the Space Launch center to launch students’ learning as well. There is an upcoming vote to increase funding for the program and expand home visiting to more schools in the district. Voting yes on the initiative will make sure all families in our city can meaningfully engage with teachers, schools and the wider community. Let’s help all students blast off!

Conclusion

This MessageBrief offers an evidence-based strategy for challenging and changing the status quo when it comes to how we think about and support family, school, and engagement. The strategy works because it expands and enriches people's perception of a topic they think they already understand. It stimulates public awareness of the idea that institutional contexts—rather than individual effort—can promote or impede family, school, and engagement. By orienting people to equity, it helps people understand how equitable practices work, and builds support for engagement policies that ensure more inclusive learning environments. Finally, by deepening the public's understanding of the transformative potential of engagement, the field can advance conversations about how engagement creates quality learning environments that improve students' development and learning, and bring attention to the range of benefits for other actors. When the field weaves these three framing moves into their messages, they help non-experts deeply appreciate and mobilize around family, school and engagement.

The execution of this framing strategy will require communicators' creativity and strategic thinking to craft specific messages that are, at once, aligned with the *Conditions for Engagement* frame and tailored to specific audiences and communication contexts. In particular, experts and advocates who are focused on engagement in early childhood will need to frame early development and early learning before pivoting to more in-depth discussions of engagement.

Given the strength of this research, and the emerging engagement field, we firmly believe that the payoff will be worth the effort. The history of social movements suggests that harnessing the unifying power of a shared framing strategy is part of creating quality learning environments and addressing educational inequities. Sharing and telling a common story is part of what it takes to enact long-term social change.⁵ We offer this work as an important asset in the forward movement toward more equitable and more inclusive access to family, school, and engagement.

Appendix: Survey Experiments

To determine the effects of different frames, FrameWorks conducted two online survey experiments between December 2018 and March 2019, which were completed by a total of 5,103 respondents. Each survey experiment was completed by individuals aged 18 and above with an IP address based in the United States. The sample was also recruited to match national US demographics for gender, race and ethnicity, income, education, age, and political party. The tables below provide the sample demographics of each survey experiment.

Table A1: Sample demographics of Wave 1 survey experiment

DEMOGRAPHIC	% OF EXPERIMENTAL SAMPLE (TOTAL N=2,400)	% OF US POPULATION
Age (mean=48.2)		
18–29	14.6	21.0
30–44	30.6	26.0
45–59	27.3	27.0
60+	27.5	26.0
Sex		
Female	52.4	49.2
Male	47.6	50.8
Annual Household Income		
\$0–\$24,999	23.4	23.2
\$25,000–\$49,999	24.1	23.7
\$50,000–\$99,999	30.0	30.0
\$100,000–\$149,999	14.1	13.0
\$150,000 and above	8.3	10.0

DEMOGRAPHIC	% OF EXPERIMENTAL SAMPLE (TOTAL N=2,400)	% OF US POPULATION
Education		
Less than high school diploma	12.2	13.6
High school diploma	23.0	28.1
Some college, or associate's degree	30.5	29.1
Bachelor's degree	20.8	18.3
Graduate or professional degree	13.5	11.0
Race and ethnicity		
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.8	0.8
Asian	5.5	4.0
Black or African-American	12.0	10.6
Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.1	0.1
Hispanic or Latinx	15.3	16.3
White, non-Hispanic or Latinx	63.3	60.6
Other race or ethnicity	3.0	7.6
Political party identification		
Democrat	47.3	46.0
Republican	37.6	37.7
Independent, or other party	15.2	16.3
Parental or primary caregiver status		
Parent or primary caregiver of any children under 18	29.3	30.0
Not a parent or primary caregiver of any children under 18	70.8	70.0

Table A2: Sample demographics of Wave 2 survey experiment

DEMOGRAPHIC	% OF EXPERIMENTAL SAMPLE (TOTAL N=2,703)	% OF US POPULATION
Age (mean=51.0)		
18–29	10.8	21.0
30–44	26.0	26.0
45–59	30.1	27.0
60+	33.0	26.0
Sex		
Female	55.7	49.2
Male	44.3	50.8

DEMOGRAPHIC	% OF EXPERIMENTAL SAMPLE (TOTAL N=2,703)	% OF US POPULATION
Annual Household Income		
\$0–\$24,999	21.4	23.2
\$25,000–\$49,999	26.8	23.7
\$50,000–\$99,999	31.1	30.0
\$100,000–\$149,999	12.8	13.0
\$150,000 and above	8.0	10.0
Education		
Less than high school diploma	11.1	13.6
High school diploma	27.7	28.1
Some college, or associate’s degree	30.4	29.1
Bachelor’s degree	19.1	18.3
Graduate or professional degree	11.7	11.0
Race and ethnicity		
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.7	0.8
Asian	5.0	4.0
Black or African-American	12.1	10.6
Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.1	0.1
Hispanic or Latinx	17.6	16.3
White, non-Hispanic or Latinx	60.9	60.6
Other race or ethnicity	3.5	7.6
Political party identification		
Democrat	47.2	46.0
Republican	37.0	37.7
Independent, or other party	15.8	16.3
Parental or primary caregiver status		
Parent or primary caregiver of any children under 18	22.0	30.0
Not a parent or primary caregiver of any children under 18	78.0	70.0

In each survey, respondents were randomly assigned to a treatment or control condition. Those assigned to the control condition received descriptive information about a fictional legislative proposal (the “Family Engagement Act”), which included three specific policies intended to promote family, school, and engagement. Those assigned to treatment conditions received identical information about the same proposal, but framed in a particular way with

a particular frame element, such as a metaphor or values-based argument. The name of the initiative for these respondents was also changed to enhance or strengthen the frame being tested.

After reading their assigned message, all respondents were asked an identical series of questions, measuring their knowledge, beliefs, and policy preferences relating to family, school, and engagement. With the exception of those measuring policy preferences, which came first for all respondents, the order of all questions was randomized for all respondents. When applicable, responses to multiple questions were grouped and analyzed together as a single measure of the underlying attitude (e.g., policy support), which are referred to as “batteries”. The batteries are listed in Table 1, along with sample questions from each battery.

The first experiment tested seven message treatments. We tested four values-based messages (*Human and Civic Potential*, *Interdependence*, *Equal Opportunity*, and *Collective Responsibility*) and three explanatory metaphors (*Infrastructure*, *Space Launch*, and *Cooking*). The second experiment tested eight message treatments: six messages explaining the benefits of family, school, and engagement to different groups involved both with and without an individual representative of the group serving as a messenger (*Benefits to Students w/No messenger*, *Benefits to Students w/Student as Messenger*, *Benefits to Teachers w/No Messenger*, *Benefits to Teachers w/Teacher as Messenger*, *Benefits to Parents w/No Messenger*, and *Benefits to Parents w/Parent as Messenger*); and two messages providing an example of equitable family, school, and engagement, one of which was framed by a values-based argument about ensuring equal opportunities throughout society (*Equity Example and Equal Opportunity* & *Equity Example*).

Multiple regression analysis was used to identify significant differences in responses to questions between the treatment groups and the control group. To help ensure that any observed effects were driven by the messages respondents received rather than demographic variation between the groups, all regressions controlled for the demographics mentioned above. A threshold of $p < 0.05$ was used to determine whether treatments had any significant effects.

Endnotes

1. For more detail on the gaps and overlaps between public, practitioner, and expert perspectives on engagement, see Pineau, M.G., L'Hôte, E., Davis, C., & Volmert, A. (2018). *Beyond caring: Mapping the gaps between expert, public, practitioner, and policymaker understandings of family, school, and community engagement*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
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