

# Talking About Racial Equity in Education



## A Brief Guide for Advocates

America can't get to the education system our nation needs without talking about race and racial equity. Yet, if communications aren't framed carefully, conversations could inadvertently reinforce unproductive misconceptions, or miss opportunities to broaden the coalition working for change. This guide offers strategies that research has shown to be effective in building deeper understanding of structural inequities and support for meaningful change.

### 1. Lead with an aspirational appeal to shared values, not a stark negative evaluation of the status quo.

Starting off with vivid descriptions of inequity can leave people feeling overwhelmed or fatalistic about the possibility of change. To more effectively engage people in this complex issue, start with a values statement that helps them picture the world you are trying to create. FrameWorks has found that the themes of Human Potential and Fairness Across Places can be especially effective in building support for policies aimed at eliminating racial disparities in educational access and quality.

#### Instead of this ✘

Our education system is broken, and it's hurting society's most vulnerable. This is particularly true in immigrant and low-income communities and communities of color.

#### Try this ✔

When we ensure that each and every child - regardless of their race, ethnicity, or neighborhood - can benefit from great learning environments, our communities benefit from the talents and skills they develop.

### 2. Explain "how it happens" before talking about "who it happens to more often".

It is especially important to explain causes, contexts, or processes before mentioning data on racial disparities. Otherwise, people are likely to fall back on negative stereotypes about those communities to explain away the statistics. The importance of clearly interpreting all reported statistics cannot be overstated. Never leave room for the public imagination to blame disparities on students or marginalized communities.

#### Instead of this ✘

National data shows that Black students are expelled at 3.5 times the rate of white students. Black students' behavior is more likely to be labeled "extreme" or "violent" than white students committing the same infraction.

#### Try this ✔

Because of images we all absorb from media and culture, our brains automatically call up associations based on race. In schools, these "snap judgments" shape the way educators interpret children's behavior. This helps to explain why, nationally, Black students are expelled at 3.5 times the rate of white students.



### 3. Frame the responsibility for the problem, and the benefits of solving it, as a shared concern.

Many Americans view disparities as unfortunate, but don't understand how structural inequity leads to inequitable outcomes, or how stepping up our commitment to equity yields collective benefits. It can be helpful to review communications with this question in mind: "Does this wording position educational equity as an issue that matters to everyone – or is there room for people to take away that it's only a problem for the students or communities who are directly affected?"

#### Instead of this ✘

The proficiency rate data reveal that more than half of fourth-graders nationally are struggling to learn to read, failing to reach an important milestone on the path to success.

#### Try this ✔

Given that more than half of fourth-graders nationally are not reading at the levels needed to engage in an information-based world, the proficiency data suggest that greater efforts are needed to strengthen the education system.

### 4. Replace edu-speak and policy jargon with explanatory techniques that help people grasp how (in)equity works.

People need to understand an issue to truly support it. Phrases like educational access, educational quality, or even educational equity don't mean much to most Americans. FrameWorks has developed and tested explanatory metaphors that help non-specialists grasp the fundamental concepts of educational equity. For example, the basic concept of inequitable access to learning can be explained by comparing learning environments to charging stations.

#### Instead of this ✘

School funding levels vary most dramatically along school-district lines, generally dictated by local property taxes, which renders the education of some wealthy children funded at double the rate of a poor kid's. Disparities in school funding, insofar as they are direct reflections of inequality across districts, can be traced to historically ingrained patterns of housing segregation and discrimination.

#### Try this ✔

Some neighborhoods are filled with places where young people can power up their learning: great schools, libraries, and afterschool programs. Other neighborhoods, primarily because of policies that tie school funding to local property taxes, have far fewer of these "charging stations" available. Every community should be able to rely on a high-wattage neighborhood school, but right now, this is far less likely to happen in communities of color.