Making the Case for Equitable and Just Public Education

Core Story of Education Messaging Strategies

In partnership with a group of foundations that includes the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, Ford Foundation, Raikes Foundation, C.S. Mott Foundation, Hewlett Foundation, NoVo Foundation, and W.K. Kellogg Foundation, FrameWorks Institute has worked to understand how the public thinks about our education system and its reform. From this work, FrameWorks developed new ways for the field to talk about education through the creation of a Core Story of Education. The Core Story of Education has been successful in reframing public education, not as something that needs to be dismantled or built anew, but rather as a system with a strong structure and foundation that needs renovation to be updated for the needs of children today.

The recommendations here draw heavily on evidence-based insights from FrameWorks' Core Story of Education research and other framing research. They provide communicators and advocates with an additional set of tools to enhance understanding and build support for a strong, updated, equitable, and just public education system.

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Recommendations

In a nutshell, the communications task facing public education advocates is to boost Americans' sense that something can be done about the issue. This entails, first of all, helping people see education as a public good that we *all*—collectively rather than individually—depend on and benefit from. Second, it involves cultivating the public's appreciation for the fact that, together, we can make the changes required to sustain those benefits over time. The communications tools presented below were specifically designed to accomplish this two-fold task.

Recommendation #1: Establish our shared stake in public education.

Education is essential to our society's future prosperity and stability, contributing to our social, cultural, financial, and civic wellbeing. The American public, however, often narrowly associates the benefits of education with individual financial success. This association is rooted in a consumerist way of thinking in which the education system works like a marketplace: what you put in is what you get out. It also feeds the toxic narrative of increased school choice because it presumes that the way to address current challenges in education is to put taxpayer dollars and state and federal money in the hands of individual consumers, via voucher or other school choice programs.

The task of framing public education as a common good—for ourselves and generations to come—can be made easier by first establishing certain shared beliefs or relevant cultural values to which we all subscribe. Values orient the audience's attitudes and behaviors and therefore address big questions like, "Why does this issue matter?" and "What is at stake?" Every community is, of course, distinct and unique. Yet Americans in all communities share a set of deeper values that are communicated through the media, our education system, social groups, and other social and cultural institutions. When values are invoked at the beginning of communications, they form the basis for social appeals that pull audience reactions in every community in desirable directions—toward engagement and change.

One example is the value of *Future Preparation*,[1] which points to our nation's obligation to plan carefully and strategically for what's ahead. It boosts a shared appreciation for public education by appealing to our common desire to equip our future leaders with the knowledge and skills they will need to address the challenges of tomorrow. Understanding that modernized learning emphasizes the development of the whole child, rather than simply producing future workers, it is important to note that *Future Preparation* can be used beyond the context of workforce development. The following excerpts illustrate how to reframe communications using this value:

Before

> **What are the short- and long-term benefits to the Chicago-Naperville-Elgin community of a 90 percent high school graduation rate, as compared to the Class of 2015's graduation rate of 86 percent? [...] The community would have gained 4,630 additional graduates. These graduates would have earned $59.6 million annually in additional income. This additional income means more money flowing into the local economy, leading to greater opportunities for this community.**

After (Reframed with *Future Preparation*)

> **Higher graduation rates help communities build brighter futures. In 2015, the Chicago-Naperville-Elgin community's high school graduation rate was 86 percent. If we can bump that up to 90 percent, we'll gain 4,630 additional graduates. That's nearly 5,000 more productive citizens—skilled retail workers, line cooks, and truck drivers—who can enhance the quality of life for us all. Boosting graduation rates today ensures a thriving society tomorrow.**

The "before" version highlights the *individual* benefits of a high school education, such as the graduate's higher social status and their increased earning potential. But it refers to *collective* educational benefits through vague language (e.g., "greater opportunities for this community") and as a secondary effect of individual benefits (e.g., "additional income means more money flowing into the local economy"). In contrast, the reframed version conveys that preparing for our shared future requires coordinated efforts, integrated communities, and a socially responsive public education system.

Alongside *Future Preparation*,[2] the related value of *Human Potential* highlights the need to expand our collective pool of talent. Invoking it paves the way for education advocates to explain that developing each child's unique abilities makes a diversity of skills available to our country, which increases our national prosperity and strengthens our democracy. A reframed communication using *Human Potential* might look something like this:

Before

> **The Right Turn Career-Focused Transition Initiative serves youth involved in or at risk of becoming involved in the juvenile justice system, providing individualized education, training, mentoring, and workforce development opportunities.**

After (Reframed with *Human Potential*)

> **The Right Turn Initiative helps realize the talents of all young people. Through individualized education, training, mentoring, and workforce development, we tap the interests and potential contributions of youth who are involved or at risk of becoming involved in the juvenile justice system. By ensuring these talents aren't lost, Right Turn enhances professional networks and strengthens communities.**

The original describes Right Turn as "serving youth" and attributes the value of education to the specific individuals served. The reframed version, however, describes Right Turn as working to improve *society* by capitalizing on the gifts every child has to offer. This more strategic communication establishes our collective stake in public education by redirecting thinking away from every child's ability to meet their own potential and toward the commonly held and universally beneficial value of *Human Potential*.

Recommendation #2: Contextualize disparities data to show that equity in education concerns us all.

The societal benefits of our public education system are greatest when all people are able to participate fully and equally. Nevertheless, disparities in access to high-quality education persist—and affect us all. The root causes of these disparities are located outside the classroom, due to factors such as socioeconomic differences, racial and ethnic stereotypes, residential segregation patterns, etc. The public, however, is inclined to see educational disparities as only affecting certain individuals and their occupational and financial success.

Here again, appealing to a shared value—in this case, the belief that a person's life chances should not be dictated by who they are or where they live—challenges individualistic thinking. In addition to underscoring the importance of quality learning environments for all children, invoking the notion of *Fairness Across Places* helps people understand that we currently do not live up to this ideal. The following reframed communication uses this value:

Before

> **Engagement practices in schools and districts continue to be uneven, uncoordinated, and disconnected from learning. This is particularly true in immigrant and low-income communities and communities of color, where barriers such as language, lack of work flexibility, financial limitations, and limited knowledge of school systems are often seen by schools as excuses to blame parents/caregivers rather than reasons to adapt or enhance policies and practices.**

After (Reframed with *Fairness Across Places*)

> **All students learn better in environments that engage families—but not all students have access to this kind of educational environment. Improving engagement requires addressing challenges in our education system, such as language barriers and school schedules that do not align with workdays. For example, school districts could provide translation services to help parents in immigrant communities stay informed, or afterschool programs to help caregivers with inflexible work schedules meet work and family responsibilities. Helping all families support their children's education, regardless of where they live, fosters a higher-quality learning environment for all.**

Whereas the "before" communication calls attention to particular communities (e.g., "immigrant," "low-income," and "communities of color"), the reframed version focuses on environmental conditions (such as language access and flexible scheduling) that make engagement more or less feasible. As such, it shuts down opportunities for victim-blaming and instead invokes our shared commitment to removing barriers to engagement—wherever they lie.

Many Americans view disparities as unfortunate but don't understand how disadvantage leads to disparate educational outcomes or how stepping up our commitment to inclusion yields collective benefits. Despite the dominant toxic narrative that the public education system is broken, typical explanations of why inequality and other problems exist are not systemic at all. For example, particular schools are described as chronically underperforming rather than, say, under-resourced. Take this quote from a popular media outlet: "There are Chicago public schools that have failed to properly educate and graduate college-ready students for 40 years, where the hallways are violent, where the administrators are checked out." This and similar statements locate the problem in violent students, poor teachers, and lazy administrators, rather than in the system itself.

To bring greater attention to the systemic rather than individual sources of inequity, communicators should pay close attention to how (and to whom) communications assign responsibility generally and in reported statistics in particular. Data should be used to highlight not only inequality but also how to change common practices and policies to increase achievement and opportunity for all.[3] Consider the following reframe:

Before

> **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.**

The above phrasing does not *directly* argue that the children themselves (or their parents) are to blame for reading proficiency rates. However, it leaves a hole for the public to fill in with explanations about individual actors in the education system, such as students who don't try hard enough, parents who don't instill discipline, or teachers who don't care. When the data refer to Black Americans, Latinos, or Native Americans, the hole also gets filled in with stereotypes about lesser ability or misplaced cultural values. Now consider this alternative phrasing:

After (Reframed with *Collective Responsibility*)

> **Given that more than half of fourth-graders nationally are not reading at the levels needed to prepare for an information-based economy, the proficiency data suggest that greater efforts are needed to strengthen the education system.**

In the reframed version, no words call personal effort to mind: nobody's "struggling" or "failing." The consequences are shared, as is the responsibility for preventing this undesirable outcome.

The importance of clearly interpreting all reported statistics cannot be overstated, as unframed numbers are vulnerable to interpretations that reinforce existing assumptions. On the other hand, "social math"—data selected and framed to make specific points—leaves less room to blame individuals and more room to acknowledge the responsibility of policy and to appreciate our fates as closely tied. Here's another reframed example, which carefully contextualizes data points to cue a sense of collective responsibility:

Before

> **Traditionally underserved students are less likely to graduate with a college- and career-ready (CCR) diploma than their peers. A lesson on how to close gaps for traditionally underserved students comes from Arkansas, Indiana, and Texas, all of which require all students to pursue a CCR diploma. In these states, the gaps between the percentage of white students and traditionally underserved students who earn a CCR diploma were smaller. In Texas, for example, 86.1 percent of white students and 85.7 percent of Latino students earned a CCR diploma—a difference of only 0.4 percentage points. In Maryland, which offers a CCR diploma but does not require students to pursue it, the CCR gap between white and Black students was more than 22 percentage points.**

After (Reframed with *Collective Responsibility* and Social Math)

> **Many states award college- and career-ready (CCR) diplomas to a higher percentage of white students than to students of color. A lesson on how to address this imbalance comes from Arkansas, Indiana, and Texas, where all students are required to pursue a CCR diploma. In these states, racial discrepancies in the number of CCR diplomas are smaller. Texas, for example, has used this policy to reduce this type of disparity to less than 1 percent. Maryland, by contrast, offers—but does not require all students to pursue—a CCR diploma; it has a 22 percent racial disparity in the number of awarded CCR diplomas.**

The statistics in the original communication refer to "gaps" in student performance or describe behavioral trends among disadvantaged groups (e.g., "underserved students are less likely to graduate with a CCR diploma than their peers"). This phrase is likely to reinforce the idea that inequality is a problem for certain marginalized groups rather than a matter of public concern that affects us all—a point reinforced in language about the need to close gaps *for* traditionally underserved students. The reframed communication, on the other hand, presents data to highlight gaps in state performance (how degrees are awarded; whether CCRs are made a requirement), which puts the onus to address disparities on public institutions rather than on students themselves.

Recommendation #3: Explain that the infrastructure required to reform our public education system already exists.

To address current inequities, meet future challenges, and keep pace with a changing world, we must continually improve our social institutions. Experts understand that public education reform is not only possible and practical but also part of the standard process by which a society develops. The American public, on the other hand, tends to view education as a failing system that eludes improvement year after year. Reforms are seen either as overly ambitious and therefore infeasible or as insubstantial and lacking evidence of impact. This way of thinking reflects the toxic narrative that government is wasteful and inefficient.

A proven antidote for this kind of cynicism involves use of the metaphor *Public Structures*.[4] This metaphor productively clarifies what government is *for*—namely, helping us achieve together what we cannot as individuals. In this way, it counters arguments about school choice by steering thinking away from the consumerist model and toward what's essential for the functioning and improvement of society as a whole. The concept at the heart of this metaphor is that Americans have worked to design, create, and maintain public structures—such as laws, highways, health and safety agencies, schools, and colleges—that support the essential operations of our country and improve our collective standard of living. Public structures are essential for the modern world to function: we all use them every day. The following excerpts demonstrate how to use this metaphor to reframe a communication:

Before

> **For a half-century, the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) has championed the need for leaders at all levels to shake off their institutional constraints and work across boundaries to address the needs of young people and their families. Bound by no constituency, IEL serves as a catalyst that helps policymakers, administrators, and practitioners at all levels to bridge bureaucratic silos and undo gridlock to improve outcomes for all young people and their families.**

After (Reframed with *Public Structures*)

> **As with any public structure, our education system relies on designers, builders, maintenance workers, and technicians to keep its infrastructure strong. For a half-century, the Institute for Educational Leadership has worked with leaders from many different sectors—including policymakers, administrators, and practitioners at all levels—to scaffold student development, support family and community engagement, and build a more prosperous society for us all.**

Framing public structures as ubiquitous utilities counters the toxic narrative that government is inefficient and inept and characterized by "bureaucracy" and "gridlock." It also shifts attention away from problematic assumptions, such as beliefs about groups that depend

on government to survive, and instead reminds us that the benefits of a vibrant public sector are universally shared. This frame additionally fosters thinking about how the quality and extent of such benefits are determined by the strength, stability, and accessibility of our public structures. In this way, the *Public Structures* metaphor promotes an understanding of public education as a two-way street in which we all take care of our education system through continual resourcing and attention. In return, it takes care of us.

Recommendation #4: Offer solutions to illustrate the potential for meaningful change.

Educators, administrators, and advocates have a wealth of ideas about how to improve our public education system. Americans generally, however, bring a strong sense of nostalgia to the idea of education reform and assert that the only way forward is to "go back to the basics." Rote learning and narrow curricula are viewed as remedies for an education system that is perceived as saddled with too many goals, topics, and technological distractions.

Providing specific examples of solutions is critical to instilling in the public a sense that we can bring about needed changes. Importantly, talking about these solutions in a practical tone avoids conjuring up cynicism about change and fatalism about the possibility for improvement. Cynicism and fatalism hinder public engagement with this issue and depress support for needed actions. Clear, concrete, and conceivable solutions presented in a reasonable and explanatory tone, however, have the capacity to foster collective efficacy and garner public support for change, as demonstrated below:

Before

> **The biggest challenges acknowledged by family engagement leaders will not surprise you: measuring effectiveness; competing priorities; and breaking down silos. The results of the recent survey remind us that, while there is a great deal of energy devoted to improving engagement and implementing effective, high-impact strategies, there is still work to do.**

After (Reframed with Strong Solutions)

> **We can overcome the challenges identified by family engagement leaders by incorporating nonacademic indicators of improvement, like school safety and attendance, into our accountability systems. We can also strengthen cross-sector collaborations and navigate competing priorities by offering to trade seats on our respective boards or by inviting people affiliated with housing, health care, and other social sectors—along with parents and families—to participate in monthly roundtables on how to better integrate and strengthen public education for all.**

The media pay scant attention to specific solutions like those mentioned above and often paint education as a system in crisis. This toxic narrative may attract attention but does not enhance public understanding or galvanize progressive action. A more effective communications strategy involves being frank about the scope and scale of the challenges we face and then putting forth concrete, viable solutions to directly address them. This will empower Americans to see that a stronger, more forward-looking and universally beneficial public education system is possible and will help us envision how we can achieve it together.

FrameWorks, in collaboration with the Partnership for the Future of Learning, looks forward to sharing the findings of new research and further recommendations in the late fall of 2018. In the meantime, the strategies described above equip communicators and advocates with a set of tools that have been empirically proven to build Americans' understanding of the importance of a strong education system to a thriving society. Additionally, they build broad support for the policies, programs, and decision-making needed to address current challenges within education and to ensure this vital public institution continues to meet our evolving needs and expands our collective possibilities in a changing world.

Tested frame elements

- *Future Preparation*
- *Human Potential*
- *Fairness Across Places*
- *Collective Responsibility*
- Social Math
- *Public Structures*
- Strong Solutions

Endnotes

1. Bales, S.N., & O'Neil, M. (Eds.). (2014). Putting it back together again: Reframing education using a core story approach: *A FrameWorks MessageMemo*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
2. Bales, S.N., & O'Neil, M. (Eds.). (2014). Putting it back together again: Reframing education using a core story approach: *A FrameWorks MessageMemo*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
3. Education toolkit: Talking about the achievement gap. (2010). Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
4. Aubrun, A., Grady, J., & Brown, A. (2005). "Public structures" as a simplifying model for government. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute; (2006). How to talk about government: *A FrameWorks MessageMemo*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a non-profit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organisation's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts and publishes multi-method, multi-disciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organisations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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June 2020

Please follow standard APA rules for citation, with the FrameWorks Institute as publisher.

FrameWorks Institute. (2020). *Making the case for equitable and just public education.* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

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