

**Understanding Teachers' Collective Role in Reform:
Mapping the Gaps Between the Expert and
the Public Understandings of Teachers' Unions**

A FrameWorks Research Report

Prepared for the FrameWorks Institute
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June 2010

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INTRODUCTION

The current media coverage of teachers' unions is decidedly, even myopically, negative. The March 10 Newsweek cover article offers a prime example of this coverage. In this article, the authors proclaim that the only way to fix American education is to "fire bad teachers." Teachers' unions are portrayed as the impediment to this housecleaning, and are vilified as the enemy of the American educational system.

It is often assumed that there is a one-to-one direct correspondence between this type of media environment and the public's internal patterns of meaning-making on an issue — in short, that the minds of Americans directly mirror, or reproduce, media coverage. Cognitive theory resists this simplification and argues for a more nuanced understanding of why people think what they do. In this view, media is one of a set of determinants in the interplay between "experience" and "culture" that structure the way that people in a culture understand.

The following report shows that public thinking on teachers' unions is, in fact, *not* a direct reproduction of the media's narrowly negative coverage. Rather, as the research presented below suggests, public thinking on teachers' unions reveals a more complex, and, in places, optimistic, picture. The fact that the public has multiple, in many cases oppositional, patterns available for thinking about teachers' unions highlights the complexity of communicating about this issue and the importance of and need for careful research. In short, Americans appear to have a wide repertoire of ways to "think" teachers' unions. A primary task for those communicating about this issue, therefore, is to understand this cognitive terrain and, in an informed and deliberate way, begin making steps toward a more balanced and informed strategy for communicating about the role that teachers' unions play in American education.

FrameWorks has conducted extensive research on education in general, which has shown that the public's perception of factors that affect how teachers do their jobs, as well as their relationship to the systems in which they teach, is narrow.ⁱ More specifically, a primary finding from this work is that, armed with current default patterns for processing information about education, Americans are cognitively disposed to see education as a series of individual interactions between a narrow set of actors: students, parents and teachers. This default perspective obfuscates the appreciation that education is a complex *system*, shaped by a wide range of groups and institutions that interact through a complex and diffuse series of relationships that are shaped, facilitated and impeded by socio-cultural, political and structural contexts. In short, it is hard for Americans to see how anything other than individual students, parents and teachers affect educational quality. FrameWorks' research has shown convincingly that even when asked explicitly about education *as a system*, stubborn implicit patterns of thinking shape reasoning such that perception lines up with the heavily rutted assumption that individual interactions between students, parents and teachers are, in the words of one informant, "what it's all about." In short, when Americans think about education, they see students, parents and teachers, and the other groups that influence the functioning of this system and the outcomes it generates are left beyond the horizon of perception and become decidedly "hard to think."ⁱⁱ

Furthermore, this research suggests that the role of unions in the education system and its reform is neither well understood nor easy to convey to public audiences. However, FrameWorks' research has shown that the use of strategically employed reframes greatly improves the public's understanding of these issues and the role they see for public policy in changing this system, as well as the extent to which they express support for important policy reforms that affect education in America.ⁱⁱⁱ

The research presented in this report is part of a larger project aimed at advancing more effective ways of describing education reform and its relationship to teachers' unions such that a more nuanced and well-rounded account of the role that teachers' unions can and do play in the education system and its reform is made evident to the public. This specific report represents the first steps toward that goal by examining how experts and the general public understand the related topics of teachers, teachers' unions and unions more generally. We compare these expert and public understandings to "map the gaps" that exist between these groups. These gaps represent specific areas where communications can bridge understandings and improve the public's access to information, and encourage new ways of thinking.

Filling the most conspicuous of the gaps between experts and the public is a key aspect of reframing the public discussion of education reform, especially as it concerns the role of teachers' unions. The combination of the expert and public interviews presented in this report constitutes the foundation for a research process that culminates in strategic, empirically-based recommendations for how communications can broaden and enrich the public discussion around education and the role that policy plays in improving this system. Armed with a knowledge of these expert-public gaps in understanding, FrameWorks moves toward the second stage of Strategic Frame Analysis™: identifying communications strategies that close the gaps, shift perspectives and activate new ways of thinking that give the public access to a wider range of information that can be used in understanding education, education reform, teachers and teachers' unions. New ways of understanding an issue translate into an appreciation of new solutions.

The "mapping the gaps" exercise is divided into three discrete research phases that serve as the organizational structure of this report. We first explored and synthesized the sometimes incongruent *expert discourse* on teachers' unions and unions more generally. In a series of "expert interviews," we examined the substance of *what* scholars and other professionals with an expert or technical understanding of teachers' unions were discussing as well as the more implicit *patterns* that underlay how they explained and talked about teachers, teachers' unions and unions more generally. The goal of these interviews was to situate the unions conceptually within a broader reform agenda.

The second part of this inquiry involved assessing how *the public* understands these issues. This part of the analysis sought to uncover the "cultural models" that members of the general public access when they think about teachers, unions and teachers' unions within a reform paradigm. As such, in a series of "cultural models interviews" conducted with ordinary (but civically engaged) members of the public, FrameWorks aimed to discover *how* Americans understand general concepts, including: the job of teachers, their relationship with and role in the larger education system and patterns of assumptions that structure the way the public understands "unions," as well as what teachers' unions are, how they work and their role in the education system. To

explore how people think about these issues, we adopted a cognitive approach and focused on the *shared underlying assumptions and understandings* that structure conversation around these issues.

As the third and final part of this initial phase of our larger research project, we compared the expert and public interviews, “mapping” — or explaining the differences between — the ideas and principles that the issue experts discussed in relation to how the public understood these ideas. FrameWorks was especially interested in identifying particularly crucial gaps in understanding that, if filled with clarifying information, would improve the public’s understanding of teachers’ unions and their ability to consider a positive role for these groups in education and reform. Finally, we identified a range of key reframing strategies that could be tested in upcoming prescriptive reframing research as ways to bridge the gaps between expert knowledge and public perception.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Expert Interviews

Experts emphasized that both the history and the profession of teaching are compulsory for understanding the role of teachers’ unions in the education system. Experts operated under the assumption that the public holds negative views about teachers’ unions, but that these institutions are actually highly democratic and member-driven. The experts we interviewed also viewed the interests of teachers, teachers’ unions and students to be largely consonant and complementary. Experts saw a number of specific functions for teachers’ unions, including: to protect employees, to give teachers a political voice and to assure and improve the quality of teaching in the education system. Experts were also in agreement that teachers’ unions need to expand the scope of their approach to focus on social issues, such as resource equity, as a means of improving education, but were highly divided in their opinions on *how* teachers’ unions should approach their cause, with some experts advocating a more aggressive and intransigent strategy and others supporting more flexible and conciliatory tactics.

Cultural Models Interviews

- Interviews revealed a set of dominant cultural models applied in thinking about teachers: *teachers are the education system, a good teacher is a caring individual, money is motivation, motivation is exclusionary* (i.e., individuals are motivated by **either** money **or** caring), *teachers produce effective products*, and *school districts restrict the ability of teachers to do their jobs*. These specific assumptions were nested in the more foundational American cultural models of consumerism and mentalism. According to the mentalist model, Americans tend to view outcomes and social problems as a result of individual concerns that reflect motivation and personal discipline. As such, the use of mentalist models by the public has a narrowing effect — it boils complex interactions between individuals, contextual determinants and systems down to either the presence or absence of individual motivation and internal fortitude.
- The vast majority of informants expressed both positive and negative opinions of unions. These positive and negative opinions were structured by *different sets of cultural models*. Informants frequently toggled between these sets of models and oscillated, sometimes in mid-sentence, between the positive and negative views that these models structured.

- In expressing positive opinions of unions, informants made assumptions that: *employees need protection, there is power in numbers and the collective threatens the individual.*
- During negative discussions of unions, informants assumed that: *society functions optimally when competition and capitalism are open and pure, individual interests are in conflict with collective benefits, unions are only concerned with pay and benefits, and money, power and politics are inherently corrupting.*
- When expressing opinions and views on teachers' unions, informants drew on and combined their implicit assumptions of two distinct domains: "teachers" and "unions." Furthermore, research revealed that the recruitment of cultural models from these domains was not random or haphazard. Rather, there were three distinct combinations of models that informants employed in talking and thinking about teachers' unions.
 - The first combination opinion on teachers' unions, that teachers more than any other group need their rights protected, was structured by the combination of the following four cultural models: *Teachers are Caring Individuals + Motivation is Exclusionary + Individual Rights Need to be Protected + Power in Numbers.*
 - The second opinion, that teachers' unions keep teachers in the system who are in it for the wrong reason, was structured by the following cultural models: *Teachers are Caring Individuals + Motivation is Exclusionary + Teachers are the Education System + Capitalism Should be Kept Pure.*
 - The third predominant trope that informants expressed about teachers' unions was that teachers' unions improve education by making teachers more motivated. The following cultural models structured this view: *Employee Rights Need Protection + \$\$\$ is Motivation + Teachers are the Education System.*

Mapping the Gaps

The following two quotes, the first from an expert informant and the second from a member of the general public, illustrate several of the specific gaps between expert and public thinking on the role of teachers and teachers' unions in American education. The quotes also clearly demonstrate the need for communications to bridge these gaps in order to create a more productive conversation around these issues.

[Talking about the problems of the education system]

The question is, do you have a system, or do you do things individually? And it's [the way people blame teachers for educational problems] almost like saying the President of the United States of America can individually solve all the problems in America. And nobody would ever say that! If you said that to somebody, they would say that's ridiculous ... There has to be, not only good teachers, but good curriculum and good services.

[Responding to a question about the role of resources in shaping outcomes and

responsibility for educational problems]

For hundreds of years people have been learning history just fine without all of that [resources]. So, yeah, it's important to have money, and it may be a limitation for you — it may be even more difficult for you if you're teaching history in a grass hut, but you can still do the job properly. If you had one book, or no books, you can still probably teach it. Is it more of a challenge? Yeah. But that means that you have to rise to the occasion. Is it fair? No. But sometimes things aren't fair. That doesn't mean that you can just give up, and it doesn't mean that necessarily those students are that much better off just because they have those things, because you could take a bad teacher with all the technology in the world, and you're not going to have a good product.

The above excerpts demonstrate some of the gaps identified in this research — that experts and the general public have different ways of thinking about responsibility; resources and support; and the issue of teacher training and professionalism. Other gaps identified in the research included: the roles and responsibilities of teachers, what teachers' unions do and how they are organized, and issues of the public or private nature of education in America. These gaps must be filled to give Americans a more well-rounded appreciation of what teachers' unions are, what they do, and their role in the American education system and the reform of this system.

Communications Implications

Most generally, the research in this report highlights the fact that advocates must be aware of the understandings that Americans bring to bear on “teachers” and “unions” in how they craft message about “teachers' unions” within the broader narrative about reform. The connection between these issues speaks to the complexity of strategic communications on the issue of teachers' unions. There are many implicit understandings that limit public thinking and narrow their perceptions of the role of teachers' unions. However, many assumptions are promising and should be activated to create a broader appreciation for the role these groups play in improving American education.

The remainder of the report proceeds as follows: We present the methods used in the study, then discuss the findings and implications of both the interviews conducted with issue experts and those conducted with civically engaged members of the general public. We then discuss the specific gaps that lie between expert and the public understandings and conclude with an initial set of recommendations that can be used to open up new avenues of thinking about the education system, education reform and the role of teachers' unions in these institutions and processes.

RESEARCH METHODS

I. EXPERT INTERVIEWS

Subjects

To locate “experts” on unions, and teachers' unions more specifically, FrameWorks compiled initial lists of both academic experts and key practitioners working in education who have “expert” knowledge of unions (people who either work for unions or who have experience working on issues in which unions figured prominently). FrameWorks' initial list was compiled

by reviewing the scholarly literature on unions, education systems and reform, and identifying widely-cited authors. The list was expanded to include non-academic experts by soliciting lists of key informants from members of teachers' unions, funders and advocates working on education reform.

The final list represented a range of opinions on unions. The qualification for participation in these interviews was not an individual's specific stance on unions (i.e., pro or anti) but rather their level of knowledge on and experience with how these groups work and are involved in the systems in which they operate.

A total of 12 one-on-one interviews, both in person and over the telephone, were conducted with these experts in March and April 2009. The interviews lasted approximately one hour and, with the participants' permission, were recorded and subsequently transcribed strictly for review and analysis.

Interviews

Expert interviews consisted of a series of probing questions meant to capture the expert understanding of teachers' unions — in short, what they are, what they do and what their role is in education and its reform. In doing so, the interviewer went through a series of prompts and hypothetical scenarios designed to challenge expert informants to explain their research and experience, break down complicated relationships, and simplify concepts and findings from the field. In one exercise, for example, experts were asked to imagine that they were speaking to a room of policymakers and had to explain how unions work and what their role is in the education system and its reform. In addition to the preset questions, the interviewer probed for additional information. For example, the interviewer asked questions that members of a hypothetical audience might ask in response to the informant's initial explanations. In this way, the interviews were semi-structured collaborative discussions with frequent requests from the interviewer for further clarification, elaboration and explanation.

Analysis

Analysis employed a basic grounded theory approach.^{iv} Common themes were pulled from each interview and categorized and negative cases were incorporated into the overall findings within each category, resulting in a refined set of themes that synthesized the substance of the interview data. Consistent with this method, the themes we identified were then modified and appropriately categorized during each phase of the analysis to account for disconfirming or negating themes and concepts presented by other experts.

What we present here is the refined set of themes that emerged from this process. Together, these themes represent the core components of the story of teachers' unions that issue experts wish to communicate. These themes establish a baseline understanding against which subsequent communication recommendations can be judged. Designing communications that yield public understanding and consideration of these expert messages is the ultimate goal of FrameWorks' research in this area.

II. CULTURAL MODELS INTERVIEWS

To complete the other side of the comparison, we conducted interviews with members of the American general public. The findings presented below are based on 20 in-depth cultural models interviews with Americans in Dallas, Texas, and Philadelphia, Pa. The interviews were conducted by two FrameWorks Institute researchers in December 2009.

Subjects

Informants were recruited by a professional marketing firm through a screening process developed and employed in past FrameWorks research. Informants were selected to represent variation along the domains of ethnicity, gender, age, educational background and political ideology (as self-reported during the screening process). Capturing this variation and looking at common and shared assumptions that run across this sample allows us to indentify and characterize “cultural models.”

In addition, educators, as individuals possessing “expert” knowledge in the subject, were screened out, and not included in the sample. The inclusion of professionals from this vocation would have likely brought expert knowledge into our sample and impeded our ability to gather data and discern broad cultural models employed in reasoning and processing information about the target concepts.

Cultural models interviews require gathering what one researcher has referred to as a “big scoop of language.”^v Thus, a large enough amount of talk, taken from each informant, allows us to capture the broad sets of assumptions that informants use to make sense and meaning of information. These sets of common assumptions and understandings are referred to as “cultural models.” Recruiting a wide range of people allows us to ensure that the cultural models we identify represent shared, or “cultural,” patterns of thinking about a given topic. And, although we are not concerned with the particular nuances in the cultural models across different groups at this level of the analysis, we recognize the importance of questions of variation and representativeness of these findings and take up these interests in subsequent quantitative phases of this project where research methods are more appropriate to answering these questions.

We were careful to recruit a sample of civically engaged persons because cultural models interviews rely on the ability to see patterns of thinking — the expression of models in mind — through talk, and it is therefore important to recruit informants whom we have reason to believe actually *do* talk about the issues in question. Moreover, to ensure that participants were likely to have ready opinions about these issues without having to be overly primed by asking them directly about the target issue^{vi} — in this case, the role of teachers’ unions in educational improvement — the screening procedure was designed to select informants who reported a strong interest in news and current events, and an active involvement in their communities through participation in a wide range of community and civic engagements.

All in all, the sample was split exactly in half with respect to informants’ gender. Eight of the 20 participants were African American, eight were Caucasian and four were Hispanic. Six

participants self-identified as Republicans, six as Democrats and the remaining eight as Independents. Half the sample was under the age of 40. We must note here that although the sample was constructed to include as much variation as possible, it is not nor was it meant to be nationally representative in any statistical way. Issues of demographic variability and representativeness of the findings presented here are taken up in a subsequent phase of FrameWorks' research. In this later method such questions can be more appropriately and effectively addressed in a large sample size, online experiment where more rigorous statistical sampling techniques are possible.

Interviews

Informants participated in one-on-one, semi-structured "cultural models interviews" lasting 1½ to 2½ hours. Consistent with the interview methods employed in psychological anthropology,^{vii} cultural models interviews are designed to elicit ways of *thinking* and *talking* about issues — in this case, ideas of teachers, education, education reform, unions and teachers' unions. As the goal of these interviews was to examine the cultural models Americans use to make sense of and understand these issues, a key to this methodology was giving informants the freedom to follow topics in the directions *they* deemed relevant and not in directions the interviewer believed most germane. Therefore, the interviewers approached each interview with a set of general areas and topics to be covered but left the order in which these topics were covered largely to the informant. In this way, researchers were able to follow the informant's train of thought, rather than interrupting to follow a set and pre-established course of questions.

Informants were first asked to respond to a general issue ("What do you think about teachers?") and were then asked follow-up questions — or "probes" — designed to elicit explanation of their responses ("You said X, why do you think X is this way?" or "You said X, tell me a little bit more about what you meant when you said X," or "You were just talking about X, but before you were talking about Y, do you think X is connected to Y? How?"). This pattern of probing leads to long conversations that stray (as is the intention) from the original question. The purpose is to see where and what connections the informant draws from the original topic. Informants were then asked about various valences or instantiations of the issue ("What do you think about good versus bad teachers?") and were probed for explanations of these differences ("You said that X is different than Y in this way, why do you think this is?"). In this way, the pattern of questioning began very generally and moved gradually to differentiations and more specific topics.

One reason for first asking generally about "teachers" was to see whether informants' cultural models of teachers included any concepts, associations or assumptions connected to teachers' unions, and what these connections were. Beginning with questions about "unions" or "teachers' unions" would have inhibited our ability to examine these questions. Therefore, the sequence of questions was designed to limit the biasing effect of discussing unions before teachers. This was all based on the hypothesis, informed by previous work on education,^{viii} that Americans do not associate teachers implicitly with teachers' unions, but assumptions associated with unions would be likely to prime informants to think about teachers in very specific ways.

However, as every interview has to begin somewhere, the order of questions may have had *some* biasing effect. In this case, talking about teachers first may have biased the assumptions brought

to bear on thinking “unions” and “teachers’ unions.” Some of the biases associated with question-ordering can be overcome by the fact that the object of analysis in cultural models work is *implicit and tacit* assumptions, rather than explicit views. Additionally, a major advantage of the multi-method, iterative design of the Strategic Frame Analysis™ approach is that subsequent research, using both other qualitative methods and quantitative experiments, will allow FrameWorks to triangulate results; examining possible biases of these interviews and verifying the results presented here.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Quotes are provided in the report to illustrate major points but identifying information has been excluded to ensure informant anonymity.

Analysis

Elements of social discourse analysis were applied to identify larger, shared cultural models. First, patterns of *discourses*, or common, standardized ways of talking, were identified across the sample. These discourses, or patterns in talking, were analyzed to reveal tacit organizational assumptions, relationships, logical steps and connections that were commonly made but taken for granted throughout an individual’s transcript and across the sample. In short, our analysis looked at patterns both in what *was* said (how things were related, explained and understood) as well as what was *not* said (assumptions).

FINDINGS FROM EXPERT INTERVIEWS

Below is a list of the core themes that emerged from analysis of the expert interviews.

1. **History is the key to understanding education reform and the role of teachers’ unions in this process.** Experts emphasized the importance of the history of teachers’ unions in understanding what these groups do and how they work. They explained that this history, and an understanding of similarities and differences between teachers’ unions and unions more generally, provides a necessarily nuanced understanding of the current state of teachers’ unions and education. An emphasis on and explanation of this history was frequently described as the antidote for what experts saw as highly negative public perception of teachers’ unions.
2. **Assumption of negative public perceptions.** Running through expert conversations, at times explicitly and at other points at a more implicit level, was the belief, or in some cases the assumption, that public opinion on teachers’ unions is wholly negative. As discussed in the second half of this report, public patterns of thinking on this subject are decidedly complex, multifaceted and conflicting.
3. **Democratic, member-driven, bottom-up organizations.** In responding to open-ended questions about how teachers’ unions are organized, expert informants emphasized the democratic nature of these groups — that “the local drives the national.” Experts explained that teachers’ unions are unique among unions in that, in practice, they remain organized around and committed to local individual members and their concerns, and that it is issues at the “grass-roots” level that drive and inform state and national agendas. These characteristics were frequently used to distinguish teachers’ unions from other union groups in the U.S.

4. **Common interests.** All expert informants argued for consonance between teacher, student and teachers' union interests. Experts explained that teachers are interested in having the strongest system of education possible, that a strong system benefits students, and that teachers' unions, in their representation of teacher voices, also have the strength of this system as their ultimate goal.
5. **Purposes.** Experts emphasized the following points in talking about the purposes, or functions, of teachers' unions:
 - a. *Protect teachers.* Experts explained that, at the most fundamental level, teachers' unions originated, and continue to function, as a means of providing teachers with protection from, and checks on, the power of their employers (i.e., as a way of protecting teachers against arbitrary firings). This function was based on the more tacit understanding that there is an inherent power differential between employees and employers and that the former requires supplementary protection to avoid abuse and unfair treatment.
 - b. *Give them a voice.* Experts were also in agreement that, as individuals, teachers have limited ability to be heard by the systems in which they teach. In this view, unions function as a means of organizing individual teachers into an aggregated political actor with a common voice.
 - c. *Assure teacher quality.* Experts also emphasized that teachers' unions function to develop, maintain and assure the quality of teaching. They explained that teachers' unions pursue this function by increasing the wages for teachers, thereby attracting and retaining competent and highly trained individuals in the profession. Protecting teachers' rights, as mentioned above, was explained as an additional way of making the profession more attractive to qualified candidates and assuring that those already in the profession have basic guarantees that allow them to perform well in their jobs. Finally, several experts explained that teachers' unions, through their communications with the public, strive to "improve the public image of teaching." This was described, again, as a way of attracting and retaining high-quality teachers.
 - d. *Bring attention to education.* Related to the point above, experts also explained that teachers' unions are a means of bringing attention not only to teachers, but to education and the educational system more generally. In this way, by giving a collective and powerful voice to teachers, teachers' unions are able to draw attention (and resources) to educational issues. Experts emphasized the fact that the presence and strength of teachers' unions at the state level was correlated with the funding educational systems received in those states — put simply, "where there are unions, there is more money for education."
 - e. *Protect "public" education.* Experts tended to focus on the concept of "public education." In this way, teachers' unions functioned "to protect public education in America." Experts identified a troubling tendency towards the privatization of education in America and saw it within the purview of teachers' unions to champion education as a public good.

- f. *Provide a policy presence.* Experts saw a clear policy role for teachers' unions. They explained that, as a group, teachers are valuable and qualified contributors to policy and reform discussions. However, experts explained that teachers *actually* have very little presence or say in educational policy. Teachers' unions have the power and, some explained, the responsibility, to organize and convey the views of teachers and give them "a seat at the policymaking table."
6. **Unions favor teacher accountability.** According to the experts we interviewed, teachers' unions are not against, but rather are in favor of, holding teachers responsible and accountable for educational outcomes. However, teachers' unions hold the position that this accountability must be preceded by greater power in decision making about how education works and is delivered. In short, experts explained that if the country asks teachers to be accountable for education's success or failure, teachers must be given a say in that for which they are held responsible.
7. **Expanding the scope.** Experts also agreed that teachers' unions need to move (more) deliberately toward a broader approach to education reform that considers equity in educational resources and opportunities. The experts we interviewed emphasized that teachers' unions have the power (and again, some experts explained, the responsibility) to bring larger social issues to the forefront of agendas and force the system to deal with underlying forces that account for current disparities in educational outcomes.
8. **Tension regarding strategic approach.** While the above themes were expressed evenly across the experts we interviewed, there was one issue on which there was considerable tension. Some experts believed that teachers' unions have not been aggressive enough in "staking" their position and "fighting" administrations. According to these experts, teachers' unions need both better messages, and to hold firm and fast in "sticking to their guns" in their ongoing "battle" with other elements of the educational system. Conversely, other experts felt strongly that for teachers' unions to become more successful in the purposes described above, they need to adopt a more flexible and conciliatory approach in policy and reform debates.

FINDINGS FROM CULTURAL MODELS INTERVIEWS

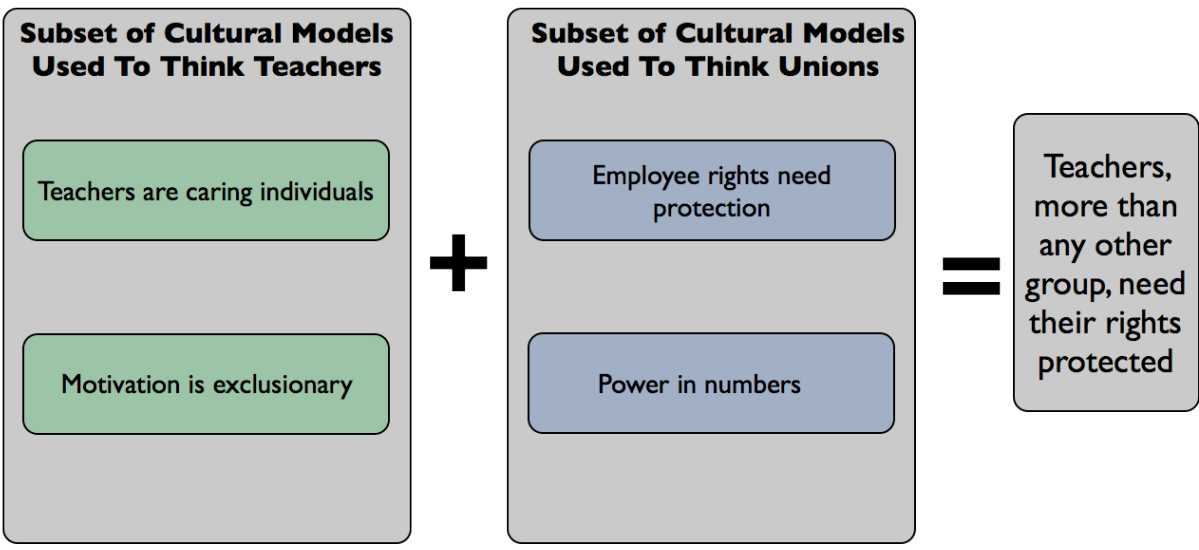
We now turn to the results of the cultural models interviews that were conducted with a wider range of civically engaged Americans.

I. DOMINANT CULTURAL MODELS

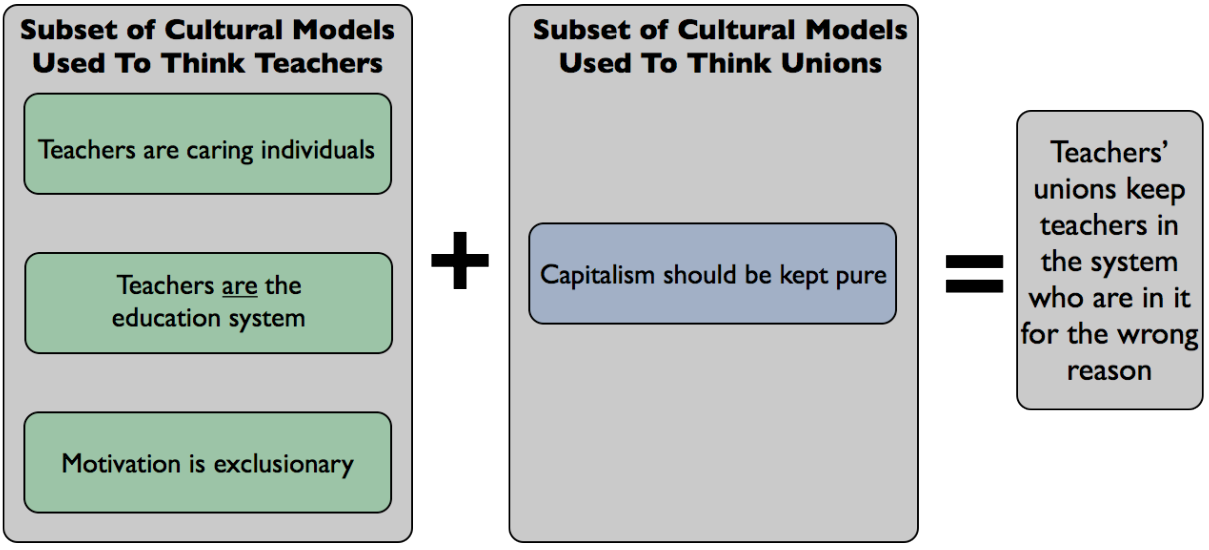
A major finding of this research is that, in thinking about teachers' unions, informants implicitly drew on *combinations of cultural models from the more general domains of "teachers" and "unions."* Of greater importance for strategic communications practice, this multi-domain recruitment was highly *patterned* — *informants drew on correlated "clusters" and specific combinations of "teachers" and "unions" cultural models to think and talk about "teachers' unions."*

Figure 1: Three ways informants pulled from understandings of “teachers” and “unions” to understanding “teachers’ unions.”

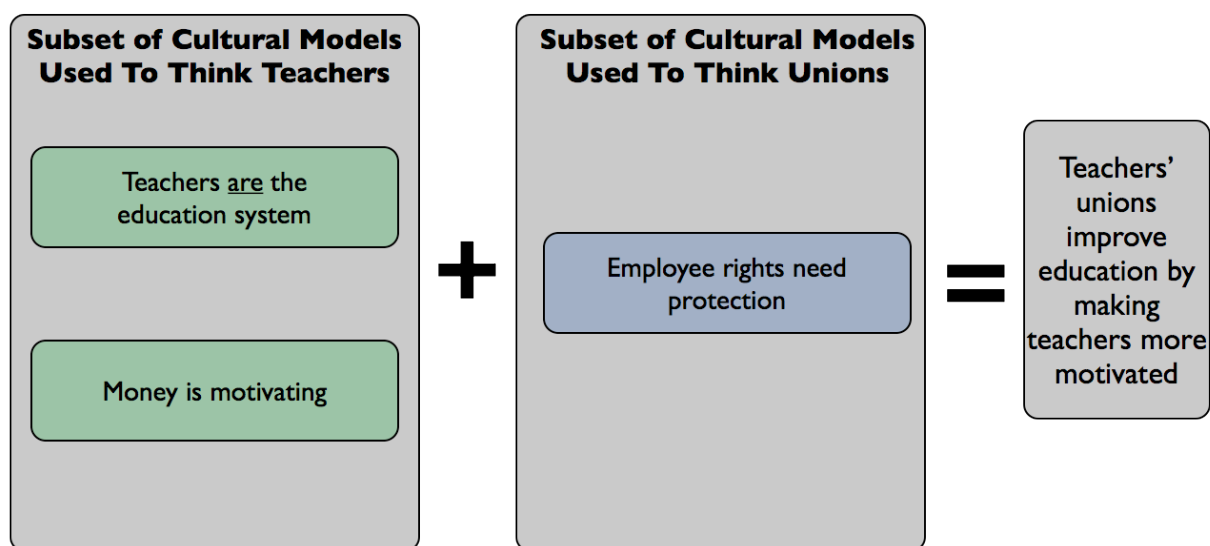
Combination 1



Combination 2



Combination 3



As separate domains, the understandings of teachers and unions discussed below have implications for communications around issues of education. However, the way that models from these separate areas are *combined* and *synthesized* to make sense, more specifically, of the role of teachers' unions in education and education reform is of particular importance to the task of messaging on teachers' unions. In this way, the patterned ways that informants brought together and applied models of teachers and unions in reasoning about teachers' unions provides strategic insight on how to better situate and orient the public to more openly consider the roles of teachers' unions in the education system.

Many of the implicit assumptions described below appear contradictory in their logic and conclusions. However, it is critical to keep in mind that the emergence of seemingly contradictory models applied to understand an issue is by no means exceptional. These contradictions demonstrate a basic feature of how people make sense of information by applying existing categories and discrete mental structures to process incoming information (see appendix for more detailed discussion of features of cultural models and cognition). Implicit assumptions, because they are used to think about many topics and issues, are discrete, compartmentalized, and therefore not necessarily consonant — they frequently appear as illogical or contradictory during analysis. The application of one or the other in a set of conflicting models is key to understanding the widely varying views and opinions that Americans have about teachers' unions and to designing strategic communications.

The cultural models used to think “teachers” and “unions” and the implications of these patterns for communications are first described. We then discuss the ways in which participants drew on, combined and toggled between models from these domains in thinking about teachers' unions and the communications implications of this patterned, multi-domain recruitment.^{ix}

A. Cultural models applied to thinking about “teachers”

Analysis of interview data revealed a highly patterned and standardized set of views, opinions and themes in informant discussions of teachers. Consistent with past FrameWorks research on education,^x informants in the current set of interviews focused on the fact that educational quality is determined exclusively by the quality of teachers in schools. While this would appear to favor an assessment of professional development, it is complicated by the fact that teacher quality is reduced to the simple act of caring. According to FrameWorks informants in these and earlier interviews, a good teacher is one who “never gives up” more than anything else, and a teacher needs to rely on a *love* of students and teaching and use this passion to muster the motivation that they need to do their job well. Analysis also revealed the view that the ultimate job of a teacher is to self-sacrificially dole out education and commit their life to producing students who can succeed in upper levels of education and secure high-paying jobs. What follows below is a discussion of the assumptions that underlie these shared themes.

1. Teachers *are* the education system

When informants thought about education and reasons for educational outcomes, their focus was trained, narrowly and exclusively, on teachers. Informants expressed views that teachers were responsible for everything from designing the curriculum to mastering the content knowledge of their subject, to “stoking” student motivation, to providing classrooms with resources. Put simply, when Americans think about education, they see teachers and only teachers.^{xi}

The assumption that *teachers are the education system* and the effect of this assumption came into dramatic relief when the interview shifted to questions that asked participants to think about the relationship between teachers and the education system. The lack of direct responses to this question despite repeated probing, and the inarticulateness of answers from participants who had offered coherent, detailed and in-depth answers to previous questions, displayed quite clearly the assumption that “teachers go it alone” and that informants had limited means of conceptualizing what teachers do in relation to the systems in which they teach. Put another way, informants lacked proficiency in envisioning any part of the education system other than teachers to the point that, when asked to do so, they audibly stumbled to make sense of and offer responses to these questions, or (unintentionally) disregarded the question and continued to talk narrowly about the importance of teachers.

Interviewer: What do you think the relationship is between the teacher and the school system itself?

Informant: That was one of the reasons we chose to leave our daughters in private school. The relations are totally different. There really is very limited relationship between the teachers and the students. There’s so many students. I mean, if you have 75 people to see all the time, it’s hard to build that relationship. But if the group is smaller, you can build that relationship. It’s in the large high schools, where they’re just basically just cycling these kids, and there is no relationship. The teacher is looking at a piece of paper, and she doesn’t even know whose is whose. It’s sort of like college where, you know, I don’t know who you are, it’s just a paper.

Interviewer: How would you describe the relationship between a teacher and the school systems in which they work?

Informant: Well ... When you say ... Are you talking about the principal?

Interviewer: What's the relationship between a teacher and the school that they teach in, the school district that their school is in? What's the teacher's relationship to other parts of the education system? Do you understand my question?

Informant: No.

Interviewer: There are different things that make up education other than just the teacher, right? So how does the teacher and all those other parts relate?

Informant: I think they all relate because they all are teachers first.

As further evidence of this assumption, informants frequently reasoned that it is up to *teachers* to fix the education system — that when asked to think about changing the education system, teachers were all that informants saw.

Interviewer: How do you think we can fix the education system?

Informant: I mean, a teacher's role is to guide students when they go astray. And not everyone has the same home environment or the correct societal norms. So, the teacher is there to help guide those. It's the teacher's, not only their *job*, but their *responsibility*.

Interviewer: How do you think we can improve the education system?

Informant: Well, we have to hold teachers accountable by making sure that our teachers are teaching their students properly. We have to hold them accountable, that they are in control of their classroom, and of course, that they are there every day so the kids won't have to deal with substitute teachers. And [we have to be sure] that this is something that they really *want* to do, and that they are *concerned* about the students, that they want to make *sure* that their children are educated.

2. “You can’t teach teaching”

Informant discussion of teachers was structured by an assumption that “you can’t teach a teacher to teach” — that being a “good teacher” is something that a person either *has* or *does not have*. These discussions were nested within a broad, foundational American cultural model that FrameWorks calls “mentalist thinking.”

According to the mentalist model, Americans tend to view outcomes and social problems as a result of individual concerns that reflect motivation and personal discipline. As such, the use of mentalist models by the public on issues related to education has a narrowing effect — it boils complex interactions between individuals, contextual determinants and systems down to either the presence or absence of individual motivation and internal fortitude. In short, Americans tend to understand events in their worlds as the product of individual drive and internal motivation — in this case, to conclude that the ability of teachers to do their job is a direct and exclusive function of their degree of determination, drive and *innate* love for their job.

There are some things you can’t teach. It’s like leading a horse to water, but you can’t make them drink. In other words, you cannot give someone the desire to want to do what they’re doing or to be a better teacher. They have to have the desire to be open to change and to be engaged. You can’t make them do that.

Well, first of all, they’ve got to *enjoy* being a teacher. I mean, *really want* to teach. *Want* to teach and *want* people to learn. It’s something they enjoy doing, and it’s just like a part of the person. And everybody can’t be a teacher.

I think you have to have a little more *heart*, because these teachers have to love their children ... It’s a different kind of feeling towards the kids.

Interviewer: So what do you think teachers need to do that job?

Informant: Patience! They need inner strength. They have to be resilient. I think it’s a tiresome job. They have to be heroic!

The overwhelming assumption was that, above and beyond all else (and in many cases there was *nothing* else), what makes a good teacher good is the presence of an innate character trait: caring. Whether or not a teacher is *caring* determines whether or not they are willing to “go the extra mile” to motivate inherently “difficult students.”

Interviewer: Why do we still have people that are willing to become teachers then?

Informant: It’s a labor of love. They just love kids and they want to make a difference in society. In their heart, they’re compassionate. It’s a labor of love.

You've got to have a desire to want to teach. I think it's something very intrinsic. You've got to have the love for the job. I've met teachers who are there because it's a paycheck, because it's what they got their degree in ... but I think those are the marginal ones, but then you get the people, and you can tell, who love their job, they love the kids.

Informant: This guy was *passionate* about his teaching. I think there should be more passion. If someone likes doing their job and they are passionate about it, you're going to listen a lot more to passion than you are with some guy just sitting up there saying, "turn to page 17, read this, what do you think, etc."

Interviewer: What can teachers do to make their job easier?

Informant: More passion about what they teach. Again, in middle school and high school levels, elementary school teachers, a lot of them that I've met tend to do enjoy teaching the kids for the most part.

Well, I think the main thing is, focusing on the reason why you're teaching. Because maybe you're teaching just to get a paycheck. You're really not gonna care about the success of your students or what you can do to better yourself, or what anybody can do to help you to better yourself. I don't know if I can articulate what a teacher really needs to do because I think it falls into a category of, if you really wanted to be a teacher or not.

Informant: I went out to the suburbs and I saw a lot of teachers ... what we used to call the 3:30 track team and they just wanted to get out of there at 3:29 and go home for the night. They didn't care about their students.

Interviewer: The 3:30 track team?

Informant: Yeah, it was an old term we used to use [for the teachers who] run out of school as fast as they can!

The assumption that innate caring is the sole criterion for quality teaching was also apparent in how informants responded to questions about what teachers need to do their jobs — where informants focused on *internal* traits. Even when more explicitly asked about the role of *external* resources, informants reported that such resources are largely inconsequential in shaping teachers, and, by extension, educational quality. The overwhelming perception was that teachers can still do their job without external resources as long as they are armed with a solid set of internal resources.

We have unbelievable technology today, to help teachers, but that just assists. It doesn't prevent. So like, in other words, would it be easier, I think, to be a teacher today using multimedia; would students be able to process history quicker because they have computers, because they have the Internet, and because of the — the multimedia approach

to learning, videos, whatever? Yeah. But for hundreds of years people have been learning history just fine without all of that. So, yeah, it's important to have money, and it may be a limitation for you — it may be even more difficult for you, if you're teaching history in a grass hut, but you can still do the job properly. If you had one book, or no books, you can still probably teach it. Is it more of a challenge? Yeah. But that means that you have to rise to the occasion. Is it fair? No. But sometimes things aren't fair. That doesn't mean that you can just give up, and it doesn't mean that necessarily those students are that much better off just because they have those things, because you could take a bad teacher with all the technology in the world, and you're not going to have a good product.

Interviewer: So what do teachers need to do their job well?

Informant: I would say they need to be enjoying their *life*. I mean, they need a positive attitude.

3. Money = motivation

Informants reasoned about how to improve teachers' ability to do their jobs through the *teachers are caring individuals* model discussed above (they should just try harder), but at other points informants relied on the fundamental assumption that *money is motivation*, explaining that paying teachers more would increase their motivation and thus improve education. Even though this assumption is different than the *quality teachers are caring individuals* model in that motivation is assumed to come from *money* rather than an innate *love* for teaching, both assumptions are still nested more generally in the mentalist cultural model. In other words, *motivation* is still the fulcrum, as both models turn on the implicit assumption that discussions of teacher *quality* are inherently about teacher *motivation*.

When they employed the *money is motivation* assumption, informants reasoned that teaching is just like any other job — that a person's motivation to work and do a good job is tied to the financial rewards derived from employment. In short, that people work hard because of the money they are paid, and by extension, the more that an individual gets paid, the more motivated they will be to work and the greater their performance will be.

When this assumption became active, informants talked about how low pay explains the lack of motivation in many teachers and that, in turn, one way to improve teacher quality would be to increase teacher salaries.

Interviewer: What would it [increasing teacher pay] do for people who are currently teaching?

Informant: Give them an incentive to become better teachers.

Teachers nowadays in this country more do a labor of love than look at it as a profession. If I'm a parent and I'm sending my child to school, I want to know that I'm getting the best, the cream of the crop. And if you make the profession of teaching *competitive* then you'll

have people who are more apt to be on top of their game — you’ve fostered an environment where the teachers are going to be the best that they can possibly be because they’re going to get paid handsomely, they’re going to be able to take care of their own children and it’s going to be something they want to do. I want to be a teacher because I want to make a good living.

Suburban areas — the tax brackets are higher. The property taxes are higher so the school district can have a lot more resources and afford to attract higher quality teachers because they can pay them more. They can offer them more, so benefits package and compensation packets are much greater.

In addition to being nested in the mentalist model, this assumption is also related to the general American cultural model that FrameWorks calls the *consumerist cultural model*. Americans’ views and understandings of a wide range of issues are shaped by the tacit assumption that the world works like a rational market — that the events occurring around us can be understood as a series of rational assessments of production and consumption, costs and benefits, and the “bottom line.”

4. The mutual exclusivity of motivation

Inherent in both of the motivation-based assumptions described above is an even more general assumption — that motivations are singular, mutually exclusive and competing. Analysis of interview data revealed a tacit assumption that individuals are motivated by either money *or* caring — that these two sources of motivation are in direct conflict and that, when a person is motivated by one, the other is unavoidably compromised.

Interviewer: So why do people become other things than teachers?

Informant: Money! This is a capitalist society. Their motivation is money. The motivation is totally different for people to be in a workforce [i.e., in non-teaching positions] because they want “the house, the dog, the 2.5 kids and a wife.”

And they want more money. And they’re just greedy, and they don’t care about the children, and how dare they hold up their education for wanting more money! But, I do understand that teachers have lives, as well as we do. They have to take care of their family, the same as we have to take care of our family.

5. School districts restrict the ability of teachers to do their jobs

A final dominant assumption that emerged from discussions about teachers was that school districts and teachers are fundamentally at odds. As discussed above, informants tended not to, on their own accord, identify school boards and administrators as important elements of “education.” However, when these largely invisible entities became discernable through

deliberate probing, informants assumed a largely negative role for administration, as the purveyors of “rules and restrictions” that “hamstring” teachers’ freedom and creativity.

Interviewer: So what’s the relationship like between a teacher and the school in which they work and the district in which that school is?

Informant: Well, ideally you would feel like you have the skills that you need. In other words, that you have the knowledge; you have the basic knowledge so you’re not afraid of entering the classroom every day. You feel that you have a sense that you can be creative in your teaching in the way that you teach so that you can put your own personal stamp on it. You have the trust and confidence of whoever is over you whether it’s a department head or a principal ... so that you’re not living in fear of them. I think certainly in a lot of school systems, teachers do feel afraid of a lot of things. They might feel afraid physically, emotionally, of the students, of the administration. They might feel afraid of losing their jobs if they don’t do something a certain way or don’t get certain test scores. So they might feel like they’re constantly being evaluated from a hostile perspective.

Informant: The teachers and the administration are like this. I know that can’t be on tape, but I think they battle a lot. They’re not on the same page.

Interviewer: Let the record show that there was just a gesture to suggest a less than friendly relationship. Sort of, push/pull with your hands.

Informant: From my perspective, when you have a teacher who has 20 something kids to deal with on a day-in-day-out basis, and they’re trying to teach this kid who has issues, or whatever ... and the parents are beating them up, and the administration is beating them up. It’s like their hands are tied.

Interviewer: When you think of “teachers,” and then you think of schools, and the school system, what do you see is the relationship between those two?

Informant: It just seems like that there is a core set of rules that they pass down to the teachers, and I’m not sure if the teachers really have much say in regards to whether or not they feel that that core curriculum is even applicable.

Implications of Cultural Models Used to Think About Teachers:

1. **Focus on teachers obscures other parts of the system.** Teachers are all they see. The presence and strength of the *teachers are education* assumption means that when advocates talk about the “education system” without careful attention to framing, all the public sees is “teachers.” This narrow view of what education is (caring teachers) and how it works (caring interactions between a teacher and their student) narrowly constricts the policies and educational solutions that the public believes germane — creating the perception that “if it’s not about teachers, it doesn’t matter.” Armed with this

dominant assumption, Americans are partially blinded to the role that other parts of the education system play in shaping educational outcomes and in supporting teachers.^{xiii}

2. **Caring instead of training.** Operating under the assumption that what ultimately determines the quality of a teacher is whether or not they are a *naturally caring individual*, Americans are cognitively predisposed to under-appreciate the impact of training, resources and contexts. Furthermore, the tendency to judge teachers by the degree to which they “care,” their ability to inspire and motivate children, and their willingness to self-sacrifice, undermines the importance of content knowledge, the ability to communicate concepts, and other skills, abilities and proficiencies that result from training — in a word, teacher professionalism.
3. **“Make teachers care more” becomes the silver bullet.** Furthermore, when the *teachers are education* and the *good teacher is a caring individual* models become active *together*, the silver bullet for improving education becomes *make teachers care more*. Solutions and reforms that focus on resources, curricula and innovations in teaching practice are seen as ineffective means of addressing a system whose performance Americans implicitly measures by either the presence or absence of, as one informant said, “teachers who give a damn.” Without careful attention to framing that deactivates or circumvents these dominant cultural models, the effectiveness of messages about policies other than those that address teachers’ internal motivations will be seriously limited.
4. **Motivation more than context.** The general assumption of the importance of motivation goes a long way in explaining why Americans generally have problems realizing the importance of context as a determinant of outcomes. More specifically in the domain of education and teachers, the assumed primacy of motivation blinds Americans to the importance of support, institutional resources, and programmatic, structural and socio-cultural factors that shape teacher and educational quality.
5. **Discussion of “administration” devolves into “politics as usual.”** Assuming that administrations work against teachers, discussions of reform that focus at the administrative level are actually likely to be perceived as working against teachers and, because of the *teachers are education* assumption described above, against American education and educational outcomes more generally. The assumption that any administration works against teachers also threatens to politicize the issue of education. Making the issue of education appear to be one of politics is likely to activate the very dominant and destructive cultural models that Americans employ in thinking about government.^{xiiii} This only increases the chances that education reform will be seen as inherently embroiled, unsolvable and hopeless.

B. Cultural models applied in thinking about “unions”

Informant views and opinions of unions can be grouped into two categories: those that were largely positive, and those that were predominantly negative. In many cases, informants toggled between these views within the same interview. When informants expressed positive views, their opinions were structured by one set of underlying assumptions, and when they spoke negatively of unions, they implicitly drew on a very different set of understandings. What, in essence, this

suggests is that there are two sets of cultural models used to make sense of unions — one that structures or is used to reason through a perspective in which these institutions are necessary in society, and another underlying more negative conclusions. From a communications perspective, this suggests that *the specific set of models communications activate is influential in determining whether the public orients positively or negatively towards this issue.*

It is also important to note that, as with all the cultural models results presented in this report, the implicit patterns of understanding described below were employed *across the sample*. In other words, they were employed equally by conservatives and liberals as well as independents.

I. Positive Perspectives

Informants talked about how unions are necessary to protect the financial interests of employees, and how the country would be worse off without these groups. Analysis revealed a set of three shared but implicit assumptions that underlie these positive views.

1. Employees lack power and are unable to protect their rights

The positive function that informants attributed to unions was based on a shared assumption that employees in general, but unskilled or “blue collar” employees in particular, need someone to, as one participant explained, “have their back.” Informants assumed that workers have rights but limited ability to protect and maintain these rights. Informants explained that the main function of a union is to provide this protection and “even the playing field” with employers.

Unions make sure that their [employees'] benefits, their wages, their status ... what is the word I'm looking for? Their *well-being*. Yeah! They're looking out for their well-being. That somebody really has their back.

A union, to me, is fighting for fairness of their members, and to make sure they're treated fairly, and that they expect from them what they're supposed to expect from them, and no more. And they ensure that that happens, and that they aren't taken advantage of. They support them, and fight for them, and they are there to make sure they get fair wages for their work, and benefits, and stuff. Because that's important to an individual. They need good benefits, health care, and all of that. So all of that ties in. So they're just fighting for their membership to make sure they get what they need to have to do the best job that they can do.

Interviewer: Who do you think are the people that are in unions?

Informant: Blue collar workers. Blue collar workers.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Informant: Blue collar workers need advocates for them. They're not fairly treated and they're not treated fairly. Blue collar workers normally are people who are not ... How do I say this? More likely than not they are people who have less education than white collar

workers.

Interviewer: When you think of “unions” in general, what kinds of associations come into your mind?

Informant: Blue collar type stuff. Plumbers, electrical, building, dock workers.

Interviewer: And what do you think unions do in those contexts, with those workers?

Informant: Increase salaries, fight on their behalf, fight for salary benefits from their employer. I guess, you know, increases in everything. Increases in salary, increases in standard of working environment. Again, I think there’s great benefits to unions.

2. Power in numbers

As informants discussed how unions functioned, there was a shared assumption that, when individuals come together, even when these individuals are relatively powerless, they gain influence and power; the power of unions derives from the size of its membership. This assumption explains the highly patterned discourse of the “power of the strike” as the tool of unions — that, when employees act as a collective group, they can turn their position as the base of production into a weapon and bring the entire systems to, as one participant explained, “a crashing halt.”

Well, they [unions] pull their resources and their views together and they put it out there. The ones that have no way to do that. They don’t have a vehicle to do that where the unions do. They have that vehicle, they have that union to put out their views.

Interviewer: What would make them more powerful?

Informant: If they had more numbers I guess.

Interviewer: More numbers?

Informant: “And you’re not going to get rid of all of us.” That’s right!

3. “Collective” and “individual” interests are in conflict

There was a powerful zero-sum assumption that underlay discussions of the positive functions of unions. According to this assumption, individual and collective interests are fundamentally at odds — individual profits come at the expense of the public good, and collective benefits necessitate individual sacrifice. In explaining that it was necessary to have unions to protect the rights of individual workers, a widely shared assumption was that *individual interests need to be protected from systems*. In short, interviews revealed a powerful and fundamental assumption

that individual and collective interests are in conflict and that individual rights need to be protected and maintained.

It's a form of structure that's well needed. Unions are probably, these days and times, just as important as the government, because they stabilize. They neutralize, they balance, they affect change when change is needed.

When there was the SEPTA strike, I was like wow they had that one clause in there that they wanted to take something back if the health reform passed and I thought that was great. I thought the union leaders were looking ahead. And it's great to have someone work with you and for you like that.

Implications of Cultural Models that Structure Positive Views of Unions:

1. **“Unions as protection in unbalanced power dynamic” has promise.** If communications can activate the assumption that employees have rights and that these rights need protection, messages about unions (and teachers' unions) and their function are likely to be positively received and easy to think by the public. The application of this model has the potential to open up thinking about a positive role for unions to play in society as a protector of those who, as individuals, lack power to maintain their rights. However, there is considerable work that must first be done in order to positively apply this. For example, to harness the potential of this pattern of thinking communications would first have to give Americans alternative ways of thinking about teachers and teaching as a profession, in which, to be successful professionals, individuals must be trained and skilled — not just caring. In short, there is considerable reframing work in other domains — mainly education, education reform and teaching — that needs to precede the use of this pattern of understanding in communications.
2. **Proceed with caution in using “power in numbers.”** The communications implications of the *power in numbers* assumption are decidedly mixed. On the one hand, inherent in this assumption is a sense of *process* — revealing how unions *work* by clarifying the source of unions' power and how they affect systems. Illuminating process is a powerful communications tool and has the ability to instill and encourage an appreciation and understanding of how citizens affect and are affected by the systems into which they are embedded. In shifting from a focus which is largely trained on individuals as actors to one in which broader collectives and systems can be seen to shape outcomes, the *power in numbers* assumption, therefore, may be effective in creating an opportunity for the public to think about other more systemic concepts — like the fact that policies, not just individual motivation, are key in shaping (educational) outcomes. Despite these promising implications, there is always a tendency in discussions of *political* power for Americans to veer off into issues of the highly unproductive terrain of “government,” which is fraught with assumptions of waste, corruption and the general misuse of power *against* the public good. Put another way, the idea of groups with power has the ever-present potential to cue more unproductive cultural models that make Americans wary of

what is an inherent connection between *political power* and *corruption*. When cued, these assumptions may derail conversations about unions.

3. **The danger of zero-sum thinking.** While the *collective and individual interests are in conflict* assumption did underlie positive views about the necessary functions served by unions, the implicit understanding has other, more negative, communications implications. The activation of this pattern of understanding fundamentally pits individual interests against social interests in a zero-sum game, where the gains of one come at the expense of the other. In communicating about unions and teachers' unions, this type of thinking is a major impediment to messages about the collective benefits and social functions of unions. The idea that unions can maintain individual rights *while* furthering collective benefits becomes hard to think from the zero-sum position. In this way, the assumption blocks the realization that individual and collective interests need not be fundamentally opposed and dissonant.

II. Negative views of unions

Interview data also revealed a set of shared negative opinions about unions. Informants explained that unions work against the public interest by making things more expensive, creating extreme inconvenience, and bringing down productivity by protecting unmotivated and under-productive workers.

It's [life] more inconvenient [because of unions]. Because not everyone has children, but a lot of people do, and it inconveniences them because you're not just inconveniencing kids from going to school ... You're inconveniencing their adult parents by not allowing them to get their children off to where they need to be, and then you'll inconvenience employers because they have employees who can't come to work. It's like an effect on everyone. It just rolls on down ...

I mean, the stuff that I read about unions, they protect their own, and I think that becomes the big issue. Like watching you protect your own when your own is representing you negatively. You know, here in Texas, if you do a crappy job, guess what, we're gonna get rid of you! For example, the first time I went to Chicago, there was a bridge being built there and the union struck. The bridge is a quarter of the way done, the union struck, and then for two years it just sat there. And I always used to joke with my friends that are up north; it's like, we don't have that because immediately, we would just go hire another group of people to fix it!

Interviewer: So when you hear about unions in the news or read about it in the newspaper, what does that make you think about?

Informant: There's going to be a strike!

Interviewer: Do you think things would be different, if we'd never had unions?

Informant: We might still be the leading manufacturer of automobiles! If we didn't have unions, airfares might not be so expensive. I have some friends who are pilots, and their salaries are outrageous because they lobby a lot. Yeah, some goods would be cheaper because it'd be cheaper to make them.

A set of five shared assumptions structured these negative views.

1. Society functions best when competition is “pure”

Underlying informant discussions of how unions create inefficiencies, zap motivation and hurt society, was an assumption that open competition and “pure capitalism” are the answers to social problems. This assumption is based on the larger consumerist model in which, since the world is an open market, making it less so, as unions were perceived to do, is seen to hurt the country.

I don't see the necessity of unions today, I really don't. I see too many companies out there that are paying their people fair wages for the work that they do. Sure, they don't have the protection that the union has, its sort of job security. But if you're a worker and you do a good job, *that's* your protection. Thirteen guys lifting a manhole cover! One guy does it, the other 12 standing around looking at it, *come on!*

The first thing that comes to mind is *money*. If they're gonna unionize, and demand higher salaries, then there's the possibility of property taxes going up, and costing more money. You know, paying more for better product is one thing, but if it's *not* gonna benefit *me*, then *I'm* not gonna be too happy about it.

It's hard to say whether we'd be better or worse [if there were no unions]. I think that, you'd see much more “capitalism.” And that's not necessarily a bad thing!

2. Individual interests are in conflict with collective benefits

The same basic zero-sum assumption about individual and collective interests described above was evident in negative conversations about unions. In the context of negative discussions, the assumption that individual and collective interests are in conflict was applied in reasoning about how, in protecting the rights of *individuals*, unions harm *the collective*.

What's good for the students is not always good for the teachers. It's unfortunate, but that's just the case.

You have a union because you're trying to protect the teachers. It may not necessarily be good for the administration. It may not necessarily be fair or good for the students. But, ultimately, somebody has to protect their [the teachers'] interests.

The union doesn't think that these things that they negotiate in their union contracts have to be *paid* for, and that adversely affects the society that they are in, because taxes have to go up. It begins to affect communities. Once contracts get to the point that they are in the stratosphere, they've got to come up with the money for that, to pay those contracts, and that has to come from the general citizen of that community, which means raising their property taxes. I don't know about you, but I don't like my property taxes going up every year, but they do. It's a bitch every time they do, pardon my French.

3. Unions are *only* concerned with pay and benefits

Informants made the assumption that unions do not deal with *how* jobs are done, but rather *exclusively* with wages, hours and work conditions. This assumption structured conversations toward an assertion that unions are divorced from the *work* that their members do — that they, as one informant said, “only do salary and benefits.” The application of this assumption was evident in the fact that not one informant saw a role for unions outside of negotiating salaries, working conditions and benefits.

Interviewer: So why do you think unions exist?

Informant: I think they exist solely so people can be treated fairly.

Interviewer: And what kinds of things do you think are involved in that?

Informant: Negotiating benefits and enforcing benefits. Like your employer not being able to make you work through a lunch break, or not paying you for overtime, and things like that ... vacation time. And sick time. Things like that.

I think they're concerned about benefits, and salary, and firing-hiring practices, pensions, benefits, retirement benefits. That's what I think about any time I see the word “union.”

4. The corrupting influence of money, politics and power

Many negative discussions of unions focused on money and power. Inherent in these discussions was a shared assumption that money and power are inherently corrupting forces — that when individuals or groups foray into the worlds of, as one participant said, “money, power and politics,” they are inevitably corrupted and lose sight of their original purpose. When informants employed this assumption, they frequently compared unions to “the government,” or talked about how unions played in the “government game.” In the course of these discussions, many of the cultural models that Americans use to think about government “rubbed off” and were applied to thinking unions. As a result of this confluence, unions were assumed to suffer from the same corruption, waste and inefficiency that Americans assume as the defining features of government.^{xiv}

The way that I view corruption say with the teamsters, or with some of these other groups, is that it's almost like the professional football realm. Like we're all part of like this group,

and we're going on strike because we don't think we're being treated fairly. So then, there's this other like scabs that come on and play, right? So, if you cross the picket line, you're gonna get your legs broken.

Interviewer: What does the union concept make you think about?

Informant: Jimmy Hoffa with a bat!

When I hear “carpenters’ union,” “electricians’ union,” “teamsters,” whatever, it’s got a negative spin, because I really feel like they’ve come so far from what their initial intention was, and now they’ve just taken advantage of and exploited their power. Sometimes they even do a good job of exploiting the people they are supposed to protect! So, the power of the organization grows, and it gets completely divorced from anything. So you have an electricians’ union that doesn’t care about providing electricity. It just cares about getting more power and money ... When your sole purpose is to secure the *financial* well-being of a group, it’s hard to think about anything *but* money and power, and leverage, and so, I think it’s easy to slip away from the ultimate mission, and when you have those things [power and money], you always want more. That’s just the human side to a union. Anybody that’s ever said anything differently is probably wrong, demonstrated by history, psychology, etc.,

I don’t think unions are necessarily a bad thing. But it’s when they start wielding, or trying to wield, power and influence beyond the scope of their charter ... I want to call it a metamorphosis, it’s procession, but it’s also reflective of our society, too. I mean, you look at a company, it kind of goes through that entrepreneurial stage, and then you kind of go through that maintaining stage, and then you kind of go through the growth stage ... It’s like unions, where they’re just getting started, and they’re really focused on new members, then they kind of get a little more comfortable, they get established, and they get so big, they get this point of mass quantity, where they say, look how big we are, we can influence a lot of things, and now they become this juggernaut, and they’ve lost the focus on the members.

5. Determinism and the difference between “ideal” and “real”

Finally, in discussing the negative aspects of unions, informants employed the implicit understanding that the way unions work in *reality* is far from their *ideal* or intended function. This assumption — which FrameWorks calls *ideal versus real reasoning* — is widespread in how Americans think about issues like government, budgets and taxes.^{xv} According to this organizing mental model, there is a glaring separation between the way that things *should* be and the way that they *are* in real life. This gap between ideal and real is perceived as being so expansive that individuals feel there is little that can be done to change their social worlds.^{xvi}

Furthermore, in discussing unions, informants assumed that the gap between real and ideal has grown to the point where this expanse is *inevitable* and *unchangeable*. Informants generally agreed that there is value in the *intended* function of unions, but in reality, they have strayed far from this original purpose.

I think in some realms they're antiquated. I think in some realms they're more hindrances than help. Unions don't do what they need to do for the people who pay into them. They're not the advocates they portray themselves to be. They're not the voice that they demonstrate themselves to be.

From what I understand, unions are just *old school!* We don't need the unions anymore because the government has come in and that's put so many rules and regulations with anti-discrimination laws, with, you know, equal pay laws, with all these kind of things. The government is involved in employment issues. Do we really need a union is what I want to know.

Implications of Cultural Models that Structure Negative views of Unions:

1. **“Pure” capitalism blocks collective benefits and other functions.** The assumption that society works best under “pure” capitalism severely restricts how Americans are able to process messages about unions. If this consumerist-based assumption becomes active, unions are likely to be viewed as a direct affront to the social good. In short, this assumption threatens to inhibit thinking about productive aspects of unions by creating an understanding in which unions work fundamentally against the good of America and its citizens, who are best served by open competition. Once people are thinking about unions through this lens, communicating messages about other functions of these groups is incredibly difficult.
2. **Zero-sum thinking leaves no space for a different perspective on benefits.** When individuals employ the assumption about conflicting public and private interests, it becomes decidedly difficult to realize the fact that individual and collective interests *are not* inherently at odds. The assumption that in order for someone to gain, someone must lose, is both ineffective logic for creating public support for social policies and does not reflect the fact that, in reality, public and individual interests can line up.
3. **Narrow perceptions create tunnel vision in perceived function of unions.** When employing the assumption that unions are exclusively involved in matters of employee compensation, the public is ill-equipped to process messages dealing with other functions of unions.
4. **The dangers of government rub-off.** Attaching cultural models that Americans use to think about government, such as assumptions of the breadth and inevitability of corruption, to the domain of unions is a decidedly unproductive prospect. FrameWorks' research has revealed that the assumptions Americans use to think about government — that it is corrupt, wasteful, inefficient, self-serving and impossibly opaque — hinder the public's ability to think about policy as a lever of social change. Applied to thinking

about unions, these models are likely to inhibit productive thinking about the role of these groups in the process of reform and social change.

5. **Ideal versus real creates crisis fatigue and zaps agency.** Ideal versus real reasoning has serious impacts on the way the public understands and responds to new information. In the case of unions, the ideal/real assumption structures thinking that the movement of unions away from their ideal and intended function is, as one informant said, “just the way it goes” — a perspective that does little to encourage public engagement and agency.

C. Calling All Models: Employing Models of “Teachers” and “Unions” to Understand Teachers’ Unions

In the discussions above, we have discussed how informants used various models to reason about teachers and others to reason about unions. Any time individuals reason about either of these concepts, or research suggests that they may use one or a set of these assumptions to process information or come to conclusions about teachers or unions. What is discussed below is the finding that Americans understand “teachers’ unions” by applying an amalgam of models from both of the domains — “teachers” and “unions” — discussed above. Furthermore, analysis revealed discernable patterns in *how* these models were recruited in structuring informant thinking about teachers’ unions.

There were three distinct combinations of assumptions from within these separate domains that became active when informants thought about teachers’ unions. Each combination of assumptions structured a different opinion of and way of talking about teachers’ unions.^{xvii} Cuing the models that underlie the more productive of these perspectives has promise in creating a more balanced public conversation around teachers’ unions.^{xviii}

Combination #1:

Teachers more than any other group need their rights protected = Teachers are Caring Individuals + Motivation is Exclusionary + Employee Rights Need Protection + Power in Numbers

Analysis of informant discussion on teachers’ unions revealed a distinct and patterned opinion: Teachers, more than any other profession, need unions and the protection they provide.

So what we’ve decided to do in the United States is teachers collectively get together and unite, so that if there’s ever a teacher that is being treated unfairly, they’re not only just dealing with that particular teacher, they’re dealing with all of us! And because there’s safety in numbers, and there’s safety in being united, and being collective, then you’re leveraging a lot more. Because, if it’s one teacher against the school district, the teacher will lose. If it’s many teachers against the school district, there’s a fighting chance to preserve the integrity. You’re basically given leverage.

I don’t think they should affect the education system, but I believe that they should be there to support the teachers. Ensuring that they have the tools that they need to do their jobs

effectively, that they can work in peace without fear, without wondering if, and when I'm gonna lose my job, just because somebody up top decides, oh by the way, you know, not enough of your students passed this ridiculous test, so you're on the chopping block next year, or you can't teach what you're supposed to teach because you need to spend all your time on this test so the kids can pass the test.

I would think because teachers are kind of low on the totem pole when it comes to school, and education. I would just assume that they would group together so that their voices could be heard. From what I know about unions, what you see on TV, and the strikes, and I mean, it kind of gets the job done when nothing else works.

They need a strong voice. They need to have somebody, an advocate, that is going to get things done for them in order for them to properly do their job adequately and efficiently.

Informants assumed that a teacher's job was to be a caring individual and to focus unselfishly on the well-being and learning of their students. Based on this and the mutual exclusivity of the motivation model discussed above, informants reasoned that good teachers aren't concerned with their own welfare; that being a good teacher means that you are willing to sacrifice; that you teach because of love, not payment; that your compensation should be seeing your students learn; and that because you are motivated by your caring you cannot and should not be motivated by monetary concerns. Because part of the qualifications for being good at their job is to be unconcerned with financial interests, teachers, more than other groups who *are* motivated by financial considerations, *deserve* to have their rights protected, and furthermore that collectivism is the source of this power.

The communications implication of the first combination of assumptions is mixed. First of all, if communications can activate this cluster of models, the public is likely to value and support the work of teachers' unions. However, each of the models that comprises the combination brings its own perceptual baggage. Therefore the deliberate activation of these models warrants considerable caution.

Combination #2:

Teachers' unions keep teachers in the system who are in it for the wrong reason = Teachers are Caring Individuals + Motivation is Exclusionary + Teachers are Education + Capitalism Should be Kept Pure

Informants also repeatedly voiced opinions that teachers' unions hurt education by, as one participant said, "making it about the wrong thing." Informants explained that teachers' unions make teaching about *money*, which zaps *caring*, creating bad teachers and destroying the education system. According to this view, teachers' unions negatively affect teacher motivation by making it about "the check at the end of the month" rather than about the self-sacrificial caring possessed by "the good ones."

In voicing this opinion, informants implicitly drew on three models of teachers and an assumption about unions. Teachers' unions are seen to work directly against what should be the teachers' primary interests — their students and the common good. Unions become a way of protecting teachers who aren't in it for the right reasons (caring) and of promoting values and motivations (\$\$\$) that people think teachers shouldn't care about (*caring teachers model*) — and when teachers become motivated by money, they cease being good teachers, which leads to a poor education system. Put another way, teachers aren't supposed to care about money and when you put this with a model in which unions are all about getting teachers more money at the expense of the interest of students and school systems, you have an obvious conflict. For our informants, the result of this “logic” was a decidedly negative view of teachers' unions as working *against* the quality of education.

When you reform something, it's usually for the betterment. That being said, because you have the unions in place and you have that tenure in place and you have these teachers that don't give a darn, how are you going to improve the overall system when you still have a percentage that don't care? Reform means that you have to improve things. You have to get the people that don't care to take a better outlook. To want to do more. How do you do that within a union system, because everything about the union says you don't have to. You just show up, you get paid. There is no reason to show any kind of improvement on anything, to reform anything. Just go in, do your job and go home. So the reform as far as unions are concerned, I can't see it happening. Get rid of the unions and I *guarantee* you will see a lot of reform. An awful lot of reform. I guarantee you will see better kids too.

I think it would all be based on who's running it [the teachers' union]. If it's really there for the teachers and the students, then yeah, I think it's fine, but if it's there just to protect the teachers, especially the bad ones, then no! I don't like it! I don't think I would vote for a union. Because I think if there's anything that can be good about Texas is that we are an at-will hire and fire state. If you're *bad*, you're *out*!

I mean when you think about them striking. You should be at *work* teaching *my* child!

Well, I listen to a broadcast from NPR about what they do to discipline teachers in New York, and what the teacher union does. Instead of firing a bad teacher, they just stick them in a building across town, don't let them teach, don't let them educate, and just pay them money just to sit there, and do nothing.

The second combination of models is more unambiguously problematic from a strategic communications perspective. It threatens to trap people in consumerist thinking and boil complex issues like education and education reform down to individual costs and benefits — thinking which obscures the importance of collective benefits, the appreciation that outcomes are shaped by systems, and the concept of public good. Plus, this combination of assumptions paints

a narrow picture of the way unions are involved in education — reifying the tunnel-vision-like view that all they do is “salary and benefits.”

Combination #3:

Teachers’ unions improve education by making teachers more motivated = Employee rights need protection + money is motivation + teachers are education

A third pervasive view in informant discussions was the notion that teachers’ unions actually improve the quality of the education system by “upping” the motivation of teachers. Employing the *employee rights and salaries need protection* model, unions were assumed to function to get teachers better pay. When higher pay was assumed to translate into more motivation (*money is motivation* model), combined with the assumption that *teachers are the education system*, teachers’ unions were seen to create a better education system.

When you’re having the employees show up at six in the morning and you’re going to work till six o’clock at night where you’re allowed a half-hour lunch and one 15-minute break. If I don’t have 15 widgets done by the end of the day, you’re fired. A union employee say he’s coming in at nine and leaving at five and getting an hour lunch, you give him health care benefits and he’ll make five widgets a day. Who’s the better employee? Who’s going to build a better product? The one with the rights, the one with the benefits and the one with the guaranteed breaks and lunch and vacation time or the one who’s sick today or one who broke his ankle? Fire him, hire someone else. Rights win out and unions garner rights better than non-unions.

Interviewer: What might be different if there weren’t teachers’ unions in the school systems?

Informant: They’d be a dictatorship. It would come down to, “you just teach whatever we tell you to teach, and don’t change unless we tell you to change, and this is the way we’ve been doing it for 25 years, and we have no change through it and we think it’s just fine.”

Informant: Unions provide a better class and caliber of teachers than a non-union teacher.

Interviewer: Why?

Informant: Because they attract the better, brighter teachers because of their funding. They have a better organization. They have a better salary. They can argue for better working conditions, shorter hours, more resources. They’re organized, they have a voice, they have power, whereas the non-unions don’t.

The third combination of models structures a relatively productive view of teachers' unions — it supports the notion that unions contribute to the functioning of education in American. However, there are likely to be several unintended consequences when this set of models becomes active in public thinking. First, attention becomes narrowly trained on the idea that *motivation* is all that matters. This blocks consideration of more structural and resource considerations. Secondly, the models further entrench the damaging notion that teachers are the only thing matters in the education system. This reification makes other factors like programs, institutional support, innovations in curricula, facilities and funding decidedly hard to think. Finally, this set of models activates and concretizes the implicit assumption that unions are only about teacher pay. This is decidedly easy to think but has the potential to get in the way of thinking that unions may in fact serve functions other than striking for higher salaries and more vacation time for teachers.

Implications of Combinations:

1. **Relative dominance.** While many informants expressed all three views and employed all three corresponding combinations of models, there was one opinion that most frequently appeared — Combination #1. This suggests that the cultural models that structure the discourse about *teachers needing protection* are the most dominant in how Americans think about teachers' unions. Even when informants employed one of the two other sets of models, they frequently found their way back to the *teachers need protection* argument and the models that underlie it. The takeaway is that *teachers are caring individuals, motivation is exclusionary, individual rights need to be protected* and *power in numbers* appear to be the most dominant cultural models applied in how Americans think about teachers' unions.
2. **The overarching lack of other functions.** Despite the unique communication challenges imposed by the available cultural model combinations, there is one glaring communication problem that runs across all three amalgams. *None of the three combinations allows people to consider a role for unions beyond salary and benefit arbitration.* Even if people are able to think *positively* about teachers' unions, they are severely limited by the cultural models available to them in how they understand the work of these groups. This inability is likely due to a concurrent problem in the way that Americans think about education, in which understandings are both limited and thin. FrameWorks has developed simplifying models to concretize and clarify the issue of education reform.^{xix} The research described here on teachers' unions suggests that, armed with a better understanding of what reform *is* — how it works and what it does — some of the assumptions structuring views of teachers' unions might productively connect to larger discussions of education reform, opening up new opportunities to discuss the role of these unions in the process of changing and improving the American education system. This hypothesis about the potential contribution of these frame elements on thinking about unions in the context of reform merits testing in future qualitative and quantitative research.
3. **Individualist models limit and bound public thinking.** Finally, the fact that *all* the dominant American cultural models of teachers are highly individualistic (i.e., they all focus at the level of the individual teacher) bounds and restricts thinking about teachers'

unions within the same confines of individualism — either as unnecessary because teacher pay is not significant to caring individuals, or as protectors of individual pay which translates into greater individual motivation.

II. RECESSIVE CULTURAL MODELS

Several other shared and patterned assumptions emerge from the cultural models interviews and, although these models were not as frequently employed and were not used with the same degree of automaticity as the dominant models described above, they are nonetheless important. We call these “recessive” models, as they can be thought of as ways that are *available* to the public to think about teachers, unions and teachers’ unions, but patterns of reasoning that individuals don’t *readily* or *automatically* employ in understanding education reform. Put another way, these recessive models require specific cuing to become active in the mind. We pursue these recessive models as promising avenues of thinking because they seem to help informants engage in more productive understandings of the target issue relative to many of the more dominant models described in the previous sections.

1. Teachers’ *associations* are about *teaching* and *how* teachers do their jobs

During the interviews, informants were asked what they thought about “teachers’ *associations* in your state.” Whereas the scope of *unions* was not seen to extend beyond salary arbitration, informants assumed that *associations* were about something very different — *the job of teaching*. Analysis of responses showed that informants relied on different assumptions in thinking about teachers’ *associations* than they employed in thinking about teachers’ *unions*. Overwhelmingly, informants assumed that teachers’ associations functioned as a way for teachers to *share ideas about how to teach* — that associations were groups that focused on improving curricula and pedagogy, and strengthening the profession.

Interviewer: So what do you think that group does? How would you describe, let’s just call them the Pennsylvania Teachers Association?

Informant: I think they keep the teachers updated and informed on new methods. Maybe as far as the curriculum that they teach — if it’s something new with English, or something new with math, some sort of new method. They keep the teachers refreshed and up-to-date on new methods and things that are going on.

I guess I would say, [teachers’ associations would be about] going to workshops. Just like they do in any profession, like an actor; an actor goes to a workshop to improve certain skills. I think associations would provide workshops for teachers. Just like doctors have to do continuing education. I think teachers benefit from that. I think teachers need to have a broader understanding of what’s going on.

Interviewer: So what would be the goals of the association?

Informant: To come together as a group to lift each other up and trade helpful information. To learn as a group from other visiting people; other people that you bring in. To hold up the positive, enjoyable and satisfying aspects of teaching and to encourage positivity. To be an encouragement to each other, to encourage each other to have more fun in teaching, to enjoy it more and to become better teachers.

The way that informants thought about *associations* is promising as it represents much of what is missing from the more dominant patterns used to think about teacher's unions. If, as a part of a comprehensive reframing strategy, the assumption about "associations" can be brought to bear on how the public thinks about teachers' unions, public thinking can begin to be expanded. This has promise in creating the space in which new, effectively reframed messages about the relationships between teachers' unions and meaningful education reform can live and take hold in the public discourse. However, the dominant cultural models discussed above are, without a more comprehensive reframing strategy, likely to overpower any isolated positive effects of the connections informants drew from the idea of associations.

2. Institutions and systems *do* matter

A second recessive model was the assumption made by some informants in some places, that institutions and systems *do* matter for teachers and educational outcomes more broadly. This understanding appears positive. However, this optimism should be tempered. This assumption was used and applied to structure views in which institutions were largely seen as *impairing* the ability of teachers to do their jobs rather than *enabling* or *supporting* them. In other words, where informants *did* make the assumption that institutions matter and voiced views structured by this assumption, these more contextual and systemic factors were assumed to operate *to the detriment of the caring teacher*, who was described as being hamstrung by the freedom — and motivation-“zapping” rules and regulations that come down from “the man.”

Answers to questions about how to improve the ability of teachers to do their jobs illustrate the caution with which communicators should approach this seemingly promising pattern of thinking. Several informants explained that, to improve the ability of teachers to do their job, systems need to “just butt out” and give teachers freedom so their natural caring can shine through.

Interviewer: What do you think teachers need in order to do their jobs?

Informant: Freedom! I think too much today, curriculums, and I think, decisions are being made at the district level, or the political level, that dictate what they are supposed to teach, how you're supposed to teach it, and I understand there's some controls there, but I think, just *get out of their way*, and let them teach! The tail is wagging the dog. You have to allow them the ability to say “hey, you know, here's my curriculum, but here's how I can help this individual. This is what this individual needs.” I just think they need the autonomy, and the freedom to do their job, and not be so concerned about standardized tests and political correctness.

The implication of the *systems matter* recessive model is complicated. If the assumption can be activated in the context of positive discussions of systemic impacts (i.e., systems that support learning) it is likely to broaden the scope of the contexts that are seen to shape educational outcomes. However, without careful attention, communications attempting to activate this assumption threaten to work against their intent by fostering the negative perception of institutions as restrictions on teacher freedom. Put another way, this assumption is promising if and only if messages can be explicit about *positive* ways in which systems matter.

3. Teachers' success = access to resources

For some participants at some points, discussion revealed a recessive understanding that a teacher's access to resources shapes educational outcomes.

Interviewer: What do teachers need to do their job?

Informant: Money! Resources! You know, it's ridiculous when the teacher says, "Well we can't do this because we don't have money for copies, or we can only make so many copies a day, or you have to share this because we can't make enough copies." I mean, it's paper, and copies, and ink, and come on! I mean, where is the money going, you know? I mean, property taxes are out of the roof to pay for schools so how come they can't ... they're already not paying their teacher, the least you could do is give them copy paper. It's ridiculous!

Interviewer: You mentioned "support" earlier, what kind of things did you mean?

Informant: When they're trying to pass different laws, we need to vote! We need to support the teachers. You know, pushing for better equipment, or better facilities, or better things that they may need for their job. More pay! I can't say more time off — they already get a lot of time off. [LAUGHTER]

The presence, although murky, of the assumption connecting teacher performance with resources has incredible promise in creating more effective and productive communications about teachers' unions. Employing this assumption, the public is likely to see teachers' unions, in their success in attaining financial resources for teachers, as actually having an effect on the quality of education. This would, in turn, open the public up to ways in which teachers' unions may be involved in educational quality other than just teacher pay. It is, however, dependent upon communicators' ability to overcome other distractions from dominant models in order to achieve this outcome.

GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING

The primary goals of this analysis have been to: 1) document the way experts talk about and explain the issue of teachers' unions; 2) establish the way that the lay public understands this and

related issues; and 3) compare and “map” these explanations and understandings to reveal the overlaps and gaps between these two groups. We now turn to this third task.

The process of mapping the gaps on the nexus of teachers’ unions and education reform is complicated by the dissonant nature of the public’s thinking on these issues.

While the primary focus of the mapping-the-gaps exercise is to identify expert/public gaps in understanding — as these features become primary targets in prescriptive reframing work — FrameWorks’ research suggests that there are areas of overlap between expert and public understandings. Generally, FrameWorks views overlaps in patterns of thinking as features of the cognitive landscape that communications can strategically activate to shift thinking away from and counteract more dominant and unproductive patterns. However, on the issue of teachers’ unions and education reform, some of these overlaps actually raise red flags for communications practice and should be *actively avoided*. At a literal level, the consonance between expert and lay understandings is tantalizing in messaging. However, consonance, in and of itself, does not suggest effectiveness in expanding public thinking or shifting to more policy-productive perspectives. In the first two points below, overlap clearly suggests patterns of thinking to *deliberately avoid in communications*. The third overlap, for reasons discussed below, is more promising.

1. **The power of money.** For slightly different reasons, both experts and the public emphasized the importance of teacher pay. For experts, increasing teacher salaries was seen as a way of improving teacher quality by attracting and keeping skilled individuals in the profession. For the public, money and motivation were related in a powerfully linear way — more money equals more motivation and therefore higher teacher and educational quality. While tempting in its congruence, the focus on money and its connections to quality is a powerful cue for consumerist cultural models, which, for reasons discussed above, are unproductive. In addition, focusing communications on money and salary obscures the public’s realization that unions are actually about *more than money*. The result is a shallow and fragile positioning, and one that could easily blow up in the communicator’s face as it devolves into many negative associations with money and teachers. Conclusion: problematic.
2. **Teachers need protection.** Both sets of interviews revealed the understanding of an inherently conflicting relationship between teachers (and teachers’ unions) and school administration. This common understanding was structured, in both groups, by an even more fundamental assumption about the relationship between employers and workers — that the two are inherently and fundamentally at odds. Again, while consonant with the expert understanding, this feature of the public’s thinking is a dangerous communications strategy. Emphasizing the *conflict* between these groups is likely to have a polarizing and politicizing effect, leading to messages that can actually serve to reinforce current media coverage on teachers’ unions. Conclusion: problematic.
3. **Power in numbers.** Both experts and the public had clear and implicit understandings that unions work through their ability to coalesce and aggregate disparate individuals and voices. While the public’s understanding was decidedly more tacit — employed unconsciously in discussing teachers’ unions — the expert understanding was

understandably more explicit and detailed on this function. Because of its consonance with the expert understanding, the power-in-numbers assumption holds promise in communications. However, as discussed in an earlier section of this report, communications must be careful and strategic in the activation of this model to avoid the traps inherent in the public's existing thinking about the corrupting influence of power in politics. Conclusion: promising.

Below, we take each one of the conceptual gaps in understanding and discuss its communications implications with greater specificity. More generally, an integral part of FrameWorks' Strategic Frame Analysis™ is to first generate this map and then design simplifying models that fill these gaps by cultivating clarifying metaphors that concretize key concepts. Designing simplifying models relies on knowing the locations and characteristics of expert-lay gaps — it requires a detailed, in-depth understanding of the map. Understanding the locations and features of the specific gaps detailed below is therefore essential as we move from the largely descriptive research laid out in this report to more prescriptive reframing experiments that will follow.

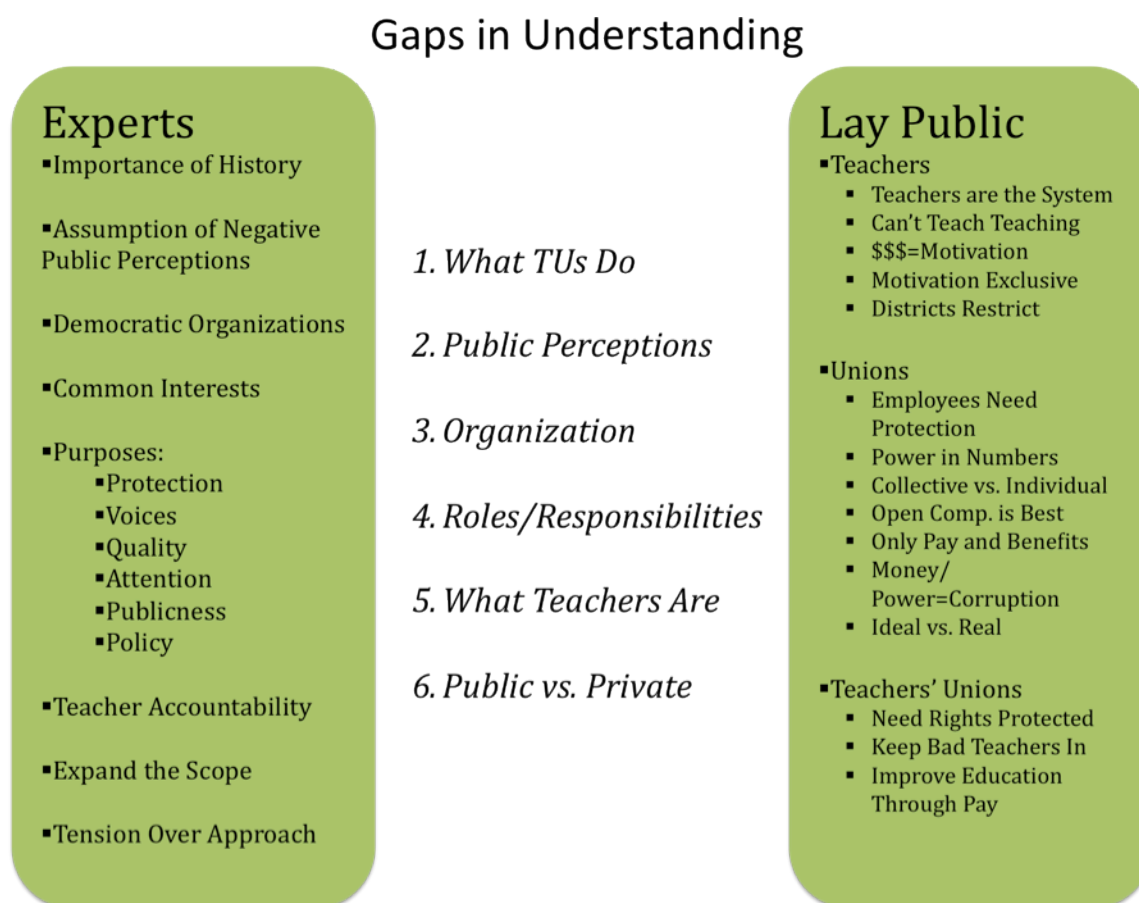
1. **What teachers' unions "do."** While experts saw a role for teachers' unions in the *practice* of teaching, the public saw these groups as divorced from this practice, even at odds with it. In addition, experts persistently focused on the fact that teachers' unions are centrally involved in education *policy and reform* — that teachers' unions focus on *how* education happens. Members of the public assumed that teachers' unions were rather exclusively about the interests of their members (i.e., wages, hours, working conditions). This gap in function represents one of the most conspicuous communications challenges on the issue of teachers' unions, as it prevents the public from fully considering the ways that teachers' unions are involved in the education system and its reform. This is an area that is ripe for the development of simplifying models.
2. **Assumptions about public perceptions.** While experts assumed the existence of a straightforward and linear relationship between media and public perception and assumed that public opinion of teachers' unions would be decidedly negative, analysis of interviews with the general public showed that the available patterns of thinking are characterized much more by complexity and nuance than by unequivocally negative views. This gap is significant as it represents a misunderstanding of public thinking on the issue by those who are likely to communicate about teachers' unions, and is therefore likely to result in defensive or overly aggressive communications rather than more strategic approaches which seek to cue the more productive ways that the public *does* have to think about teachers' unions and education reform. This finding has important implications for tone, a testable proposition in future research.
3. **Organization/structure.** Experts clearly saw teachers' unions as democratically structured and unique among unions in the degree to which they are driven by member voices and concerns. The public, on the other hand, assumed that teachers' unions are inherently corrupt and ruled from the top down, with limited ability to consider and account for the interest of the teachers "at the bottom." This bottom-up versus top-down view represents a significant impasse between these groups and points to the need for translational work on the structure and organization of teachers' unions. This might

provide an opportunity for a wider array of messengers, for example, which might warrant testing in FrameWorks' quantitative experiments.

4. **Shared Roles and responsibilities.** Experts emphasized that teachers not only play an important role in education, but that this importance should be reflected in an equally pivotal role in educational decision-making. While the public clearly saw teachers as important in the delivery of education, their understanding did not include a sense that teachers can and should be involved at a more systemic level in making decisions about how education happens. There is, therefore, a gap between the importance experts place on teachers having a role in setting educational policy and the absence of an assumption of this policy role in how the public thinks about teachers. Experts also emphasized the fact that, no matter how involved with the decision-making process teachers become, they should never be seen as solely or completely responsible for educational outcomes — in short that there have always been and will always be other players in the system that shape its outcomes. Public thinking was not as nuanced in its assignment of responsibility and assumed a role for teachers as the lonely bearers of responsibility for the success or failure of American education. Both qualitative and quantitative aspects of FrameWorks' future research will explore the ability of frame elements to resolve this problem.
5. **What teachers are.** Expert informants emphasized the importance of teacher training in both the quality of a teacher and in improving education in America. They also saw a major role for teachers' unions in the development and maintenance of this professionalism. Meanwhile, lay informants operated under the assumption that what really mattered for quality teaching was an individual's natural or innate "caring." This gap between understandings of teacher quality represents a truly fundamental problem in communicating not only about teachers, but about the unions to which they belong, and the nature of the reforms that professional development is able to support. Whether this problem can be addressed by reminding people about the professional development needed to support good teaching is an important aspect of the next round of FrameWorks' qualitative research.
6. **Public versus private.** Experts explained that a primary goal of teachers' unions was to assure the health and strength of *public* education in America — to counter what they saw as a snowballing movement toward privatization. Based on this and previous FrameWorks research on education, the public does not share this perspective on the public/private debate and views this tension through largely consumerist assumptions. In the consumerist understanding, the privatization of American education is inherently unproblematic and even desirable, as it is seen as a way to make education more efficient and "productive." The experts' emphasis on the need for a strong *public* education system and the dangers of a system that is becoming increasingly privatized is at odds with the consumerist understanding that most Americans apply in thinking about the issue. This means that messages about the importance of public education, espoused by the experts, are inherently hard to think and easy to discount by a public that employs a fundamentally different view on how the world works. Whether simplifying models and values drawn from FrameWorks' research on government, specifically on the common good, can address this problem may constitute one aspect of future quantitative research.

Figure 1 below summarizes the gaps between expert explanations and lay cultural models.

Figure 1. Schematic of the Conceptual Gaps Between Experts and the Public



CONCLUSIONS

This report describes and examines the implications of the ways that members of the expert community and the general public think about the concepts of teachers, teachers' unions and unions more generally in the context of education reform. Thinking on these topics is examined through the analysis of interview data with members of both of these groups. The primary goals for this report have been to consider the limitations of the dominant cultural models currently in place in the public's thinking and to locate specific gaps between the ways experts and the general public understand and talk about these issues. Strategic communications must address both of these communications challenges — redirecting public thinking away from perceptual traps posed by unproductive patterns of thinking and filling in gaps where content knowledge is missing from the public understanding. Addressing these challenges through the design of

specific frame elements including simplifying models and values is a major task as FrameWorks moves into more prescriptive framing research on this topic.

Ultimately, the report demonstrates the pressing need for experts and reformers to work on providing Americans with alternative ways of thinking about what it is that teachers and teachers' unions are, what they do, and what their roles are and could be in the education system and its reform. It is our firm position that, without new ways to think about teachers' unions, the public will interpret communications on this issue through the perspective that unions are not actually involved in the education system and do not, therefore, figure into the process of its improvement. Should these assumptions persist and continue to dominate how Americans make sense of messages on this topic, experts and advocates stand little chance of forwarding the message that teachers' unions are an integral part of the education system and should, must and will play a pivotal role in the reform of this system.

This report has argued that more of the same is simply not an option in messaging about teachers' unions — that what is needed are new frames and communications strategies that shift away from patterns of thinking that restrict perceptions of the roles of teachers' unions. Since thinking about teachers' unions is based, at least in part, on the cultural models that Americans hold and employ in thinking about *teachers*, communications must also attend to and shift away from the dominant default cultural models that Americans use to think about teachers. Subsequent phases of research will explore precisely how experts and advocates can most successfully address the communication challenges presented here.

While this research represents the first phase of a much larger investigation, several preliminary recommendations and future directions have become apparent. We present these here as *preliminary communications recommendations*:

1. *Expand the reach of teachers' unions.* Communications should give specific and concrete examples of how teachers' unions are involved in the education system and how they are and could be involved in improving this system. There is an opportunity to embed teachers' unions in causal series that link them to positive reforms and extended outcomes.
2. *Avoid activating the overarching "teachers' unions do teacher salary" assumption.* Communications should avoid discussions of "strikes," "negotiations," "salaries," and "benefits," as these concepts are strong cues for dominant models that lead to narrow thinking about the role, function and purview of teachers' unions.
3. *Steer clear of "caring" teachers.* The *good teachers are caring teachers* model found here and in past FrameWorks research is a serious communications trap. This implicit focus limits the perceived effect of contextual factors on educational outcomes and the importance of teacher training and qualification — thus restricting the types of policies that the public can view as important in improving American education to those that deal directly with the caring and motivation of teachers. Furthermore, almost all unproductive and limiting views of teachers' unions are predicated upon this assumption. Therefore, communications would be wise to avoid, in any way possible, activating this highly dominant pattern of understanding.

4. *Employ “power in numbers” implicit understanding to arrive at clear and easy-to-think explanations of how teachers’ unions work and what they do.* As an understanding that was both implicitly present in lay interviews and more explicitly stated in expert interviews, the understanding that teachers’ unions derive their power from their membership is promising as a communications tool that can illuminate how these groups work and what they do. Additionally, showing the local and locally determined nature of teachers’ unions holds promise in inoculating against assumptions about the negative power and authoritarian control of national unions.
5. *Activate the “teachers’ success = access to resources” model.* In concert with an expanded picture of the roles and functions of teachers’ unions, activating the recessive assumption that the quality of teaching is tied to institutional resources is highly promising in bringing unions into the public discussion of education reform. If teachers’ ability to teach can be connected to the availability or lack of resources, and teachers’ unions can be framed as having a hand in securing these resources, the public will be equipped to see a role for teachers’ unions in the American education system and the process of reform.
6. *Associations have promise.* While FrameWorks’ cognitive approach to communications does not endorse “word-smithing,” or the idea that reframing is about using “magic words,” there is promise in the assumption that underlies the concept of *teachers’ associations*. If the model that informants in this study used to think and talk about teachers’ associations can become operative in how the public thinks about teachers’ unions, perceptions about the roles and responsibilities of the latter can be expanded. Accomplishing this, however, will require more than a word change; it will require consistent reframing.
7. *Strategically employ the importance of teachers’ unions as the voice of teachers in establishing educational policy.* Research shows clearly that Americans agree that teachers play an important role in the education system. This understanding is problematic in its narrowness, as has been discussed throughout this report. However, this assumption *does* confer a strategic advantage. Its presence suggests that teachers’ unions may be successfully reframed as a means of *making sure teachers have a voice* and a say in setting and changing how education happens in our country. Given the importance the public places on teachers, communications focused on giving this group a voice in policy are likely to be “easy to think.”

APPENDIX: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The following are well-accepted characteristics of cognition and features of cultural models that figure prominently into the results presented in this report and in FrameWorks’ research more generally.

1. *Top-down nature of cognition*

Individuals rely on a relatively small set of broad, *general* cultural models to organize and make sense of information about an incredibly wide range of *specific* issues and information. Put another way, members of a cultural group share a set of common general models that form the lens through which they think and make sense of information pertaining to many different issues. This feature of cognition explains why FrameWorks’ research has revealed many of the same cultural models being used to think about seemingly unconnected and unrelated issues — from education to health to child development. For example, FrameWorks’ research has found that people use the *mentalist* model to think about child development and food and fitness — seemingly unrelated issue areas. For this reason, we say that cognition is a “top-down” phenomenon. *Specific* information gets fitted into *general* categories that people share and carry around with them in their heads.

2. *Cultural models come in many flavors but the basic ingredients are the same*

At FrameWorks, we often get asked about the extent to which the cultural models that we identify in our research and that we use as the basis of our general approach to social messaging apply to ALL cultures. That is, people want to know how inclusive our cultural models are and to what extent we see/look for/find differences across race, class or other cultural categories. Because our aim is to create messaging for mass media communications, we seek out messages that resonate with the public more generally and, as such, seek to identify cultural models that are most broadly shared across society. We ensure the models are sufficiently broad by recruiting diverse groups of informants in our research who help us to confirm that the models we identify operate broadly across a wide range of groups. Recruiting diverse samples in our cultural models interviews often confuses people who then think we are interested in uncovering the nuanced ways in which the models take shape and get communicated across those groups, or that we are interested in identifying different models that different groups use. To the contrary, our aim is to locate the models at the broadest possible levels (i.e., those most commonly shared across *all* cultural groups) and to develop reframes and simplifying models that advance those models that catalyze systems-level thinking. The latter does not negate the fact that members of different cultural groups may respond more or less enthusiastically to the reframes, and this is one of the reasons why we subject the reframes that we recommend to our clients to rigorous experimental testing using randomized controls that more fully evaluate their mass appeal.

3. *Dominant and recessive models*

Some of the models that individuals use to understand the world around us are what we call “dominant” while others are more “recessive,” or latent, in shaping how we process information. Dominant models are those that are very “easy to think.” They are activated and used with a high degree of immediacy and are persistent or “sticky” in their power to shape thinking and understanding — once a dominant model has been activated, it is difficult to shift to or employ another model to think about the issue. Because these models are used so readily to understand

information, and because of their cognitive stickiness, they actually become easier to “think” each time they are activated — similar to how we choose well-worn and familiar paths when walking through fields, and in so doing these paths become even more well-worn and familiar. There is therefore the tendency for dominant models to become increasingly dominant unless information is reframed to cue other cognitively available models (or, to continue the analogy here, other walking paths). Recessive models, on the other hand, are not characterized by the same immediacy or persistence. They lie further below the surface, and while they *can* be employed in making sense of a concept or processing information about an issue — they *are* present — their application requires specific cues or primes.

Mapping recessive models is an important part of the FrameWorks approach to communication science and a key step in reframing an issue. It is often these recessive patterns of thinking that hold the most promise in shifting thinking away from the existing dominant models that often inhibit a broader understanding of the role of policy and the *social* aspect of issues and problems. Because of the promise of these recessive models in shifting perception and patterns of thinking, we discuss them in this report and will bring these findings into the subsequent phases of FrameWorks’ iterative methodology. During focus group research in particular, we explore in greater detail *how* these recessive models can most effectively be cued or “primed,” as well as how these recessive models *interact* with and are *negotiated* vis-à-vis emergent dominant models.

4. The “nestedness” of cultural models

Within the broad foundational models that people use in “thinking” about a wide variety of issues lay models that, while still general, broad and shared, are *relatively* more issue-specific. We refer to these more issue-specific models as “nested.” For example, in our past research on executive function, when informants thought about basic skills, they employed a model for understanding where these skills come from, but research revealed that this more specific model was nested into the more general *mentalist* cultural model that informants implicitly applied in thinking this issue. Nested models often compete in guiding or shaping the way we think about issues. Information may have very different effects if it is “thought” through one or another nested model. Therefore, knowing about which models are nested into which broader models helps us in reframing an issue.

About FrameWorks Institute:

The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1999 to advance science-based communications research and practice. The Institute conducts original, multi-method research to identify the communications strategies that will advance public

understanding of social problems and improve public support for remedial policies. The Institute’s work also includes teaching the nonprofit sector how to apply these science-based communications strategies in their work for social change. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations, as well as toolkits and other products for the nonprofit sector, at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

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ⁱ See <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/education.html> for information on FrameWorks’ research on education.

ⁱⁱ Bales, S. (2009). *Framing education and education reform: A FrameWorks MessageMemo*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

ⁱⁱⁱ Simon, A. (2010). *Values framing and attitudes toward higher Education*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

^{iv} See: Glaser, B.G., & Strauss, A.L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory; strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co. and Strauss, A.L., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

^v Quinn, N. (2005). *Finding culture in talk: A collection of methods* (1st ed.). New York: Palgrave Macmillan. P. 16.

^{vi} Priming informants with the content can be problematic in these interviews, as the ability to identify and describe cultural models relies on getting “top of mind” answers and explanations from informants, rather than carefully thought-out and pre-constructed responses to the issue in question. If primed with the focus of the interview, informants tend to “prepare” by doing “research” on the subject, yielding results that are actually not representative of their own understandings and explanations of issues.

^{vii} Quinn, N. (2005). *Finding culture in talk: A collection of Methods*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

^{viii} See: Chart, H. & Kendall-Taylor, N. (2008). *Reform what?: Individualist thinking in education: American cultural models on schooling*. (2009) Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute. *Enough blame to go around: A focus group analysis of education and reform: A FrameWorks research report*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

^{ix} This organization reflects two streams in cultural models research — the description of implicit assumptions brought to bear in understanding a given issue (referred to in the literature as the “structure” of cultural models), and *how* these shared mental models are employed as making sense of and constructing meaning (referred to as the “agency” of cultural models). The combination of these two

approaches in this situation shows particularly well that while cultural models may be highly shared, more specific patterns and variations can exist in when, how and toward what conclusions these models are applied. See, Quinn, N. & Holland, D. “Culture and cognition.” In Holland, D. & Quinn, N. (Eds.) (1987). *Cultural models in language and thought* (pp. 3-40). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

^x The corpus of FrameWorks’ research on education can be found at:

<http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/education.html>

^{xi} This particular finding is explained in greater depth in the body of research FrameWorks has published on education reform. See the following two reports for more information: FrameWorks Institute. (2009). *Enough blame to go around: A focus group analysis of education and reform: A FrameWorks research report*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute. Chart, H. & N. Kendall-Taylor, N. (2008). *Reform what?: Individualist thinking in education: American cultural models on schooling*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

^{xii} This may partially explain the public’s limited ability, described below, to see teachers’ unions as part of the education system.

^{xiii} Bales, S.N. (2006). *How to talk about government*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

^{xiv} See: Bales, S.N. (2006). *How to talk about government*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute, and Kendall-Taylor, N. & Bales, S. (2009). *Like Mars to Venus: The separate and sketchy worlds of budgets and taxes*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

^{xv} Kendall-Taylor, N. & Bales, S. (2009). *Like Mars to Venus: The separate and sketchy worlds of budgets and taxes*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

^{xvi} In this way, the ideal-versus-real assumption is nested within the much broader pattern of deterministic thinking — a fundamental American cultural model. The determinism model hinges on a general assumption about the lack of personal agency in the face of incredible complexity and inevitable conclusions. In short, determinism is the pervasive cultural assumption that the world works in mysterious ways that are complex, invisible, and ultimately beyond the scope and power of individuals to understand, control or shape.

^{xvii} While this may appear to be a sort of rational decision-tree, in which individuals consciously pick and choose from various domains and volitionally apply understandings to make sense of a complex domain like teachers’ unions, the actual cognitive process is far from logical or volitional. In actuality, the recruitment of the models from domains of “teachers” and “unions,” even though appearing to be more complex than the process described above for how informants thought about “teachers” and “unions,” is not a deliberate decision and does not “feel” particularly complex in situ. Instead, this process, even when it recruits from multiple domains as is described below, occurs rather instantaneously and without conscious consideration. This naturalness results from the fact that these patterns are activated by familiar tropes in media and culture that have reinforced these assemblies of assumptions and their connections over time. In short, the way that people draw from different areas of understanding is highly patterned, immediate and natural because people living in and exposed to a common culture have had tremendous practice applying these understandings. And while it may appear more complex that teachers’ unions are understood through a combination of models as compared to other areas that are understood using more single domain and seemingly specific models (like teachers above), there is actually little difference in the cognitive task that is being performed. Provided with information, individuals employ patterned connections between information and structures of meaning — sometimes there are single assumptions and sometimes there are amalgams of various different assumptions that facilitate this process of meaning-making.

^{xviii} The argument here is not one of directionality, but rather that there are associations between certain assumptions in both of these areas such that the interview data are characterized by patterned groupings of models. Put another way, these data do not allow us to explore what cues what, or what model become active first and then recruits the other, but rather that the relatively limited ways of understanding teachers’ unions are structured by sets or pairings of assumptions about teachers and about unions — that when a certain cultural model of teachers is applied to understanding teachers’ unions it is normally

accompanied by a corresponding assumption about unions. The connections between assumptions brought to bear on understanding teachers' unions sheds light on why Americans think the way that they do about teachers' unions — and how, by activating different available assumptions, communications can activate certain interpretations and avoid other, less-productive patterns of thinking this issue. The fact that there are a relatively wide array of available assumptions for thinking about teachers and unions suggests that new couplings of assumptions from these domains may enable still-greater appreciation of the role of teachers' unions in the education system and in its reform.

^{xix} Kendall-Taylor, N. (2009). *Orchestrating systems and remodeling reform: Reframing education reform with simplifying models*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.