Education is at a Crossroads

For advocates working in education and related fields, COVID-19 has created an opening to talk about long-standing needs. How we frame education now affects what is possible later.

Decades of privatization efforts, such as the voucher system, coupled with enduring racism and implicit bias, often in the form of harsh disciplinary action against students of color, have left the promise and vision of public education unfulfilled. And now a global pandemic is putting poor communities and communities of color at even greater risk. Despite these realities, many people—advocates, parent activists, teachers, community members, artists, and students—are working together to remodel our education system. That means updating the core features of public education to ensure that learning is meaningful and relevant and that schools and the communities they serve are equitably resourced and safe—for all students, everywhere.

For the advocates and organizers leading this work, it's been a long, hard road. But we have reached what could be a defining moment in this journey: an opening in public dialogue about education that can help us make allies among the general public.

Choosing our words carefully is paramount. Fatalism is high right now, and the public needs your help to see what's possible and where they fit into creating positive, effective change. By strategically framing this moment and the solutions that can see us to the other side of it, we can mobilize greater public will for long-term social and systemic change.

Well-Framed Messages Can Point the Way

Knowing the public's "preset" assumptions and beliefs about education can help you decide what ideas to lean into and which to avoid to make sure people really hear your message.

FRAME WORKS

Over the past 20 years, FrameWorks has consistently found that certain ideas tend to dominate how people think about issues related to children, family, and education, including the following:

- *Family Bubble*: "Childrearing and child development happen in the home, and how well children turn out fundamentally depends on their family relationships."

- *Individualism*: "Anyone who has sufficient ambition, self-discipline, and will can dictate their life outcomes no matter the circumstances."

- *Tangible Triad*: "Students, parents, and teachers are the three main players in the education system—so if the system isn't working, it must be their fault."

- *Caring Teacher = Good Teacher*: "Teachers who really care about their students are willing to make sacrifices."

- *Separate Fates*: "Different racial groups compete against each other in a zero-sum game, and white communities and communities of color live in distinct worlds and are on different paths."

- *Fatalism*: "Nothing can be done about many of the social issues we face. Inequality is just a natural part of life."

When people reason about education from any of these perspectives, they have a hard time seeing how systemic factors influence outcomes—and if people can't see a systemic problem, they won't look for systemic solutions.

While these beliefs are durable, the pandemic seems to be breaking them down. More people are recognizing that families need support beyond what can be found in the home, that there is power in community, and that our food, health, education, workforce, and childcare systems have to work together if they are going to work at all. More of us see how our fates are intertwined.

Like a stuck door that gives just a bit under pressure, the public's dawning insights are an invitation to advocates to push harder. The right framing tools can dislodge the patterns of thinking that have limited public support for educational change and move the conversation in a positive direction:

- **Values:** Before they'll engage with a problem, audiences need to know why their attention is being called. Values do that. And they help us think from a civic, not an individual, mindset about what's at stake for all of us.

- **Explanation:** Once the "why" is established, explanation can answer the "how." Explaining the mechanisms of a problem or the inner workings of a system builds audiences' knowledge. It's persuasion without persuasion tactics. Tested metaphors, explanatory chains, and examples are all explanatory strategies.

- **Solutions:** And finally, solutions make the "what" clearer. To counter the prevailing sense of fatalism that surrounds so many issues today, share proposed solutions and show how they would work.

The sample language below models these framing strategies across a number of education-related issues.

Child and Adolescent Development

Connect the dots between adolescent development, education, and equity.

1. Highlight the future benefits of healthy adolescent development for everyone.

2. Use "discovery" metaphors to show how essential schools are for successful development.

3. Explain how racial and economic disparities are linked to structural inequalities and reinforce the importance of redressing them.

Instead of this:

Adolescence is a pivotal time in our lives. Schools play a critical role in this because they provide opportunities to explore the world around us, try new things, and learn by trial and error. Right now, though, distance learning makes that harder for some students and easier for others. Just like they would with in-person learning, schools have to make sure all of their students have the resources they need in the digital space.

Family and Engagement, School Learning, Community Schools

Remind people that family, school, and community engagement are vital for equity.

1. Remind people that engagement is about ensuring *all* students have the opportunity to succeed, regardless of their and their family's circumstances.

2. Show them what equity looks like by providing clear explanations of what inequities are and how they operate.

3. Give concrete examples of equitable solutions, such as the community schools model.

Future of Education

Emphasize that our education system as a whole is compromised when we allow some schools to thrive and others to fail.

1. Appeal to the values of *Fairness Across Places* and *Inclusive Opportunity* to help people understand segregation and inequity as structural weaknesses in our education system that can be addressed through collective action, rather than as a result of isolated decisions or individual actions.

2. Use the *Public Structures* explanatory metaphor to help people see education as a necessary utility, which serves us each in different ways at different times, but which we all depend on as a critical piece of public infrastructure that supports a strong and functioning society.

3. Name at least one collective action—a concrete, large-scale solution—that we can take together to rise to the current challenge.

Instead of this:

Many school districts have announced they will continue remote learning into the fall, which has left parents—who are worried about their kids' ability to learn online, not to mention their own ability to keep their jobs with no child care—scrambling for solutions. Some with disposable income are forming "pods," hiring private tutors to lead them, and renting out meeting spaces where they can be held. But low-income parents can't afford to

participate, which is amplifying the already extreme levels of segregation and inequity in the American school system.

Try this:

Many school districts have announced they will continue remote learning into the fall, which has different implications for different families. We need to create safe alternative learning environments that include all students and reflect the needs of everyone involved. If we leave parents to navigate this challenge alone, well-to-do families may form their own learning "pods" and hire private tutors, which would draw resources away from the community as a whole and deprive the majority of our kids of essential educational opportunities.

Remind people that our nation's best strategy for preparing for whatever the future brings is to ensure that our next generation of citizens and problem-solvers is equipped with a quality education.

1. Appeal to the value of *Future Preparation* to facilitate "common good" thinking about the importance of education, not just for students but for families, communities, and society at large.

2. Use the *Forward Exchange* metaphor to explain that we have to take a long-term and forward-thinking approach to investments in education by recognizing that the strength of our innovations and advancements a generation or two from now will be a reflection of the priorities we set today.

Name a clear, concrete solution that can support or enable the "common good" to occur at a systems level.

Instead of this:

The crisis facing public education systems right now is not due simply to the recent job losses and associated fall-off in tax revenues. It is also fueled by the extra costs that schools and universities will face to operate safely in the

COVID world: the extra spacing, cleaning, masks, technology needs, and so on. The school systems being hit hardest by the coronavirus pandemic—particularly in poor communities and communities of color—are the same ones that have been experiencing serious financial cutbacks for more than a decade. Essential resources in these communities are increasingly being diverted to pay school resource officers to police our kids.

Try this:

The coronavirus pandemic has made clear that, in order to thrive, we must equip our society with the skills to respond, adapt, and innovate. Nothing serves this goal better than a quality public education system. Though our schools and universities are burdened right now by a fall-off in tax revenues and the extra costs of operating safely in the COVID world, we can't afford to take a shortsighted approach. We already waste precious resources on punitive programs and band-aid fixes, like paying school resource officers to police our kids, which strains our social institutions and weakens our communities in the long term. Let's invest instead in teacher training, school nurses and counselors, and transformative justice programs that set us all up for brighter days ahead.

Let's Push the Conversation Forward

Nearly two centuries ago, Horace Mann famously wrote, "Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is a great equalizer of the conditions of men—the balance wheel of the social machinery." For those who support public education, his vision remains true today. In its sincerest form, public education *is* the "great equalizer," the cornerstone of our democracy, and one of the first places young people begin to experience the world outside of their family and understand what it means to be part of a larger community.

What is also true is that schools have always been more than sites of learning. The pandemic reveals the depths of our reliance on schools and educators to do more than teach. Schools are community anchors, social service providers, organizers of support for children and families, and hubs for relationship building. Schools—whether brick and mortar or virtual—are a microcosm of our larger society. Our country can prosper and thrive only to the degree that all of our communities and

people do. How we ensure their wellbeing is a matter of proper investment and support for all schools, communities, children, and families.

Mann understood that the "balance wheel of the social machinery"—an equitable, interdependent education system—could not turn itself. Instead, he urged, "Let us not be content to wait and see what will happen, but give us the determination to make the right things happen."

The framing strategies laid out above are designed to bolster advocates' outreach and engagement. They can help people imagine what an equitable, racially just, and well-funded education system looks like. They can help people see how that system is deeply connected to our other social systems. They can mobilize them to join the effort to ensure that Mann's affirmative vision becomes our reality.

They can help us make the right things happen.

About FrameWorks

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

Learn more at www.frameworksinstitute.org

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