



Framing Education Reform: A FrameWorks  
MessageMemo

Prepared for the FrameWorks Institute  
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## Preface

This MessageMemo reports on work conducted by the FrameWorks Institute on how Americans think about education in America. Since the establishment of the nation's first public school in 1635, our country has always recognized that public education, democracy and the common good are closely intertwined. As John Adams wrote in the 18<sup>th</sup> century: "The whole people must take upon themselves the education of the whole people—and be willing to bear the expense of it." More than 250 years later, the debate around that premise remains alive and well. From *Brown vs. Board of Education* and *A Nation At Risk*, to *No Child Left Behind*, one can see aspects of that debate playing out in the public arena — and informing public policy.

In our own time, the public conversation about the American educational system centers on student achievement, on standards and accountability, on educational gaps among groups, and on how teachers are recruited and trained. Ideas and innovations that aim to solve problems in education are advanced by education experts and thought leaders across the political and ideological spectrum, and are spread by the media. Some of these new ideas come from groundbreaking discoveries in the neurosciences about how students learn and develop; other ideas are borne of innovative pilot efforts that have shown results. Regardless of their own preferred agendas, educational leaders know that, in order for any large-scale changes in the education system to take hold, they must devote themselves to building the public will for reform.

This recognition is what brought the Nellie Mae Education Foundation and the Lumina Foundation to support a systematic inquiry into patterns of public thinking about American education. Recognizing that education has often represented a highly contested arena for public policymaking, these funders wished to understand the terrain they and their grantees enter when they advance reforms as seemingly uncontroversial as better teacher preparation or increased access to affordable college, as well as more admittedly ambitious reforms like dismantling the traditional K-12 or school-based framework.

The FrameWorks Institute was tasked with employing its multi-method, iterative approach to communications known as Strategic Frame Analysis,<sup>™</sup> which recognizes that each new push for public understanding and acceptance of an issue happens against a backdrop of long-term media coverage, of perceptions formed over time, of scripts we have learned since childhood to help us make sense of our world. Strategic Frame Analysis<sup>™</sup> is grounded in and draws on methods from the cognitive and social sciences, including anthropology, linguistics, cognitive psychology, sociology, political science and communications theory. For more on this communications approach, see our eWorkshop: "Changing the Public Conversation on Social Problems: A Beginner's Guide to Strategic Frame Analysis." <http://sfa.frameworksinstitute.org/>

Specifically, FrameWorks investigated the following overarching questions about K-12, pre-school, and higher education:

- How does the public think about American education?

- What is the public appetite for reform of the education system?
- What is the current public discourse on both education and education reform?
- How does this discourse influence and constrain the public choices that are made about education?
- How can education, at all levels, be reframed to evoke a different way of thinking, one that illuminates the need for more public responsibility, and for alternative policy choices?

The ultimate goal of this work was to identify the direction of a more engaging and productive conversation about the education system that is open to, and supportive of, meaningful reform.

### Methods

In this MessageMemo, we report the findings from a series of qualitative and quantitative studies that follow the Institute's process of Strategic Frame Analysis<sup>TMi</sup> to: (1) document the cultural models available to ordinary people when they think about education; (2) understand how patterns of news coverage inform and drive these patterns of thinking; (3) observe these models in action as small groups of people publicly negotiate issues related to schools, reform and the educational system; (4) identify the challenges for communicating about these issues; and (5) experiment with reframes that might evoke a more productive discussion.

The research base is as follows:

- **49 in-depth interviews** were conducted with adults in five states (Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Rhode Island and California) by two FrameWorks Institute researchers in June and July 2008. Informants were selected to represent variation along domains of ethnicity, gender, age, educational background and political ideology. Interviews ranged from one to two hours in length and followed an open-ended guide created by the FrameWorks research group. They were recorded, transcribed and analyzed based on principles and data-gathering methods adapted over the last ten years from the fields of psychological anthropology and cognitive linguistics. The complete results are published in "[\*Reform What?: Individualist Thinking in Education: American Cultural Models on Schooling: A FrameWorks Research Report\*](#)" (Chart, H. with Kendall-Taylor, N. September 2008. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute).
- **18 peer discourse sessions** were conducted with adults in seven cities – Baltimore, MD; Montpelier, VT; Manchester, NH; Boston, MA; Memphis, TN; Indianapolis, IN and Sacramento, CA — in September and October 2008. All sessions were moderated by researchers affiliated with the FrameWorks Institute and followed guides developed by the FrameWorks research group. Participants were selected through a professional marketing firm to represent variation in ethnicity, gender, age, educational background and political ideology, but all participants were screened to ensure a strong interest in current events and active involvement in their communities. Additionally, groups were

varied by educational attainment and by race; 11 were racially homogenous (four black, four white and three Latino) and seven were racially mixed; seven of the groups had bachelor's degrees or above, seven had some college or less, and four had a combination of education levels. Each session of approximately eight participants lasted two hours, was audio and video recorded, and transcribed for analysis. This analysis combines principles from cultural models analysis with methods adapted from political sociology. The complete results are published in "[\*Enough Blame to Go Around: Understanding the Public Discourse on Education Reform\*](#)" (February 2009. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute).

- **A review of national and local media** covering education and education reform was undertaken for the period from June 1, 2007, through July 31, 2008, yielding 385 stories that were examined for their narrative components. The results are published as "[\*Put Down Your Pencils Please\*](#)" (Center for Media and Public Affairs May 2009. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute).
- **A cognitive media analysis** of the likely effects on public understanding of exposure to common media narratives was also conducted, based on 492 articles appearing from June 1, 2007, to June 1, 2008, in newspapers in Detroit, Los Angeles, New York City, Washington, D.C, Boston, Atlanta, Chicago, Houston, Miami, Denver, San Francisco and Seattle. The findings are published as "[\*Don't Give Up On Education!\*](#)" (Manuel, T., April 2009. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute).
- A complementary media analysis, focusing directly on **media depictions of racial disparities in education** and schools, as well as in coverage of early child education, was made possible with additional funding from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. This report, "[\*Invisible Structures of Opportunity: How Media Depictions of Race Trivialize Issues of Diversity and Disparity\*](#)" (O'Neil, M. February 2009. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute), is based on newspaper coverage nationwide during 2007.
- **An iterative, multi-method approach was used to develop simplifying models**, or metaphorical short hands, for critical education concepts. Based on 48 on-the-street interviews, an on-line experimental survey with 5,450 respondents and TalkBack Testing sessions with 48 informants,<sup>ii</sup> FrameWorks researchers identified two important models (from among dozens tested) that can be shown to advance conceptual thinking about the education system in general and education reform in particular. This report is published as "[\*Orchestrating Systems and Remodeling Reform: How Simplifying Models Can Set the Stage for Policy Thinking\*](#)" (Kendall-Taylor, N. December 2009. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute).
- As part of the process for identifying simplifying models, FrameWorks also took advantage of the **on-line experimental survey** of 7,400 respondents to test four values in June 2009 for their ability to advance progressive reform policies. These findings,

currently unpublished, will be further validated in a second experimental survey to be conducted and published by FrameWorks later this year.

This Memo is not intended to take the place of the research reports that inform it; indeed, FrameWorks strongly recommends that communicators avail themselves of these reports ([www.frameworksinstitute.org/education.html](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/education.html)) and challenge their own creativity to apply this learning. Representative quotations are used here to remind the reader of the research base that informs these assertions; more nuance and variety can be found in the original reports. Multimedia presentations, including the voices of informants engaged in the testing process, are also posted at this site.

In addition to summarizing and synthesizing that body of work, this Memo extends this descriptive research by providing another level of more detailed and prescriptive interpretation to inform the work of policy advocates. It should be understood that these recommendations may be further refined by subsequent research and analysis. We believe there is ample evidence from the studies on which this Memo is based to support the assertion that (1) public messaging about education and education reform must be reframed if it is to inspire support for change and (2) there are a number of core communications elements that show strong evidence of opening a door to that new conversation.

This MessageMemo is organized as follows:

- We first provide a description of the **Mental Landscape**, which maps the patterns of thinking that are “top of mind” for people, as well as patterns that are less common, but still accessible.
- We then offer framing recommendations in the form of **Redirections**<sup>iii</sup> that incorporate frame elements to change the course of public thinking.
- We next focus on the **Traps** in public thinking that must be avoided if reframing is to succeed.
- We then identify the **Gaps** in understanding between experts and ordinary people – where public thinking often breaks down from lack of bridging information.

## **I. The Mental Landscape: Patterns of Public Thinking about Education and Education Reform**

There are many cognitive routes people could take in attempting to understand the system of education in the United States and to contemplate prospective reforms. The following are those that proved most “top of mind” to research informants. Like familiar features of the landscape, these patterns, along with those that are less dominant, were observed in both individual interview situations and in small group discussions. We summarize below those we consider to be the most important for communicators to appreciate as they attempt to redirect the conversation about education reform. Sections 1 – 5 address dominant ways of thinking, that is,

those mental routes that proved easy for people to perceive and incorporate into their conversations. Sections 6 – 8 describe more recessive ways of thinking, that is, promising mental routes that *could* be discerned and used by people but which required more effort to evoke.

1. **Little Picture Thinking: Education systems are invisible, which makes reforms unimaginable.** While experts see a system at multiple levels – from pre-K to higher education – with numerous potential sites for learning, the public’s vista on education is decidedly narrower. The people we interviewed struggled to see an education system at all, and instead focused completely on the individual classroom and on the achievement of individual students. They also focused immediately and exclusively on the K-12 years, even when prompted to discuss pre-K or higher education. Moreover, they had difficulty thinking about relationships between parts of the system, and how they might be realigned or reinvented. For example, few if any informants mentioned school governance, leadership, financing or other aspects of the system that education reformers consider vitally important. When prompted to describe other actors in the system, informants often cited the ideological and political battles that are reflected in media coverage.

The implications of this finding for communicators are profound. Without a more detailed landscape of multiple actors, such as school boards, superintendents, principals, chancellors and state legislatures along with a more concrete view of the parts of the system that need fixing, Americans lack the ability to thoughtfully consider education reform policy proposals. This challenge is perhaps best captured in on-the-street interviews,<sup>iv</sup> where informant after informant literally “went blank” when asked to describe the education system and discuss education reform.

While this may seem a high bar for citizen knowledge of public affairs, education and related issues are well covered in news media, providing Americans with a daily dose of information on the subject; indeed, FrameWorks’ media content analysis of education issues in the news – national and regional, broadcast and print – yielded 384 relevant articles over a 14-month period. Clearly, the media provides a steady diet of education stories for Americans to digest. What FrameWorks’ qualitative research reveals, however, is that these are largely empty calories. That is, Americans do not seem to have acquired a base of knowledge that can be built on by education reformers. One reason may be that most news about education is local news, not focused on national reforms. Moreover, the majority of coverage is episodic (54 percent of stories in our sample), focused on a single school or school system, without making connections to broader trends in education reform across the country.<sup>v</sup> In sum, advocates should not assume a great deal of depth in Americans’ understanding of education.

2. **The Tangible Triad: unframed conversations about education and education**

**reform default to three highly visible actors who are then judged as primarily responsible for education results: parents, teachers and students.** Education was consistently described by FrameWorks' informants as "happening" among a triad of parents, teachers and students. It was in contemplating and describing these interactions that people were able to explain vividly how education works. While it is indisputable that parents, teachers and students play important roles in educational outcomes, the intensity and exclusivity that FrameWorks' informants brought to this view of who is responsible for education crowded out their ability to consider the equally important roles that school boards, taxpayers, superintendents, principals and other policymakers play in creating, maintaining and reforming education. Thus, by extension, if there are problems that require reform, they are logically assumed to be issues of motivation, character, discipline or effort attached to these key actors. The following examples from the research demonstrate this problem:

***Interviewer:** Do you feel like there's kids [that the system] doesn't work for?*

***Informant:** I don't know. This might be bad to say. Ones from broken homes, ones that aren't interested. Maybe it doesn't work for them... It should work for everybody. But it's only individual I think, how they achieve. If they want to learn, they're going to learn. No matter where they go to school.*

*White Liberal Woman, age 54, Massachusetts<sup>vi</sup>*

*Kids don't want to learn. They don't even care. Let's text message when we're in high school... I see the GPAs of some of these kids and it just blows me away. You know, you don't have to be perfect, but let's try a little...Because they don't care. They haven't been taught to care.*

*White Conservative Woman, age 55, California<sup>vii</sup>*

*I think the families in which the students come from actually, you know, they determine if the school struggles or if the school flourishes... Just what they instill in their children. Because a school struggling means that the children in the school are struggling. So it's all based on the students I believe.*

*African-American Liberal Man, age 34, Massachusetts<sup>viii</sup>*

*Teacher is a very important profession. ...Everything the teacher says has a severe impact. You know, an imprint left on the kids. So whether you're in a good school or not, you know, even if it's in a less successful school you still could make an impact on the student.*

*Asian Independent Woman, age 57, Massachusetts<sup>ix</sup>*

*I think it goes both ways. It is both parents and the schools, you know. There is enough blame to go around...You can have parents that do the best they can with the*

*pressures they are under in society today, working and all, but once their kids go to school it has got to be a good school. It's got to be a school with teachers that are willing to teach them.*

*Baltimore Peer Discourse Informant, Mixed Race, Mixed Ed Group<sup>x</sup>*

This kind of thinking puts systemic reforms at a great disadvantage because failures in educational outcomes are explained with immediate reference to deficiencies in any of these three responsible parties. In session after session, peer discourse participants “spoke ad infinitum about the lack of discipline and motivation among students, teachers, and parents as underlying causes of school failure.”<sup>xi</sup> Their prescriptions for reform, when thinking along these lines, were often nostalgic, as in this exchange between peer discourse participants:

*Participant 1: “We didn’t have no Ritalin.”*

*Participant 2: “The only thing we had was a belt.”*

*Baltimore Peer Discourse Session, African American, Low Ed Group<sup>xii</sup>*

**Closely related to this set of assumptions is the idea that student success and teacher effectiveness are related to a single quality: caring.** When teacher competency is judged in this way, people fail to grasp the importance of teacher recruitment and training, professional development, and other aspects of the profession that education reformers routinely discuss, and that are considered necessary to strengthening the system.

**Interviewer:** *What are the most important aspects [of the school system]?*

**Informant:** *Teachers, honestly. If you have a teacher that really cares about the students, they make a world of difference. If they’re just there for the paycheck, you’re not getting that good of an education.*

*White Conservative Man, age 26-29, New Hampshire<sup>xiii</sup>*

*[T]eachers, because of their union obligations and the way they feel, they start school the minute they arrive to school, a minute before their first class and they leave 20 minutes after the last bell....I don’t see teachers dedicated like I used to....so I think they are failing all our children with that attitude that I see a majority of the teachers having, at least in the area where I live.*

*Peer Discourse Participant, Vermont, White, High Ed<sup>xiv</sup>*

Similarly, the good parent requires little more than caring to motivate the student, ignoring the role that family and community resources or the quality of the learning environment might play in student success.



3. **The kinds of reforms that are easiest to think are the most conventional: money, “the basics,” and computers.** First, most people assume that any reforms to the current educational system would require that much more money be invested in existing programs. In this respect, they mirror the media discourse. In news accounts, “cold hard cash was the most frequently discussed resource connected with educational reform, accounting for 41 percent of resource discussions. Money was also the dominant way of framing the costs of education reform, accounting for 60 percent of cost discussions.”<sup>xv</sup> There is little understanding of systemic reforms that are cost-neutral but might realign parts of the system, or reforms that might save money overall. Education reform is assumed to be expensive and, in the current economic environment, beyond our reach. Thus, when education reformers talk about large and ambitious reforms, they are frequently viewed as idealistic and impractical.<sup>xvi</sup>

For example, there was almost universal resistance in FrameWorks’ peer discourse sessions to the idea of universal college preparation. Ironically, it emerged most forcefully in the context of a discussion about a more individualized, flexible, and equally accessible educational curriculum. Participants overwhelmingly argued that, “although everyone should have the opportunity to go to college if that is their choice, they should be given the choice whether or not they wished to pursue the path. From this perspective, college is not a viable option for everyone, so why force everyone down the path. A few participants even argued that using resources for universal preparation was wasteful and inefficient because there are so many who do not go on [to college].”<sup>xvii</sup>

Second, even though people believe that more individualized instruction is necessary, this does not lead them to value innovation. Instead, it takes them back to “the basics.” For example, participants in FrameWorks’ peer discourse sessions “characterized the curriculum as inherently ineffective because everyone is forced to go through the same process regardless of individual differences in skills, abilities or proclivities between children...One might reasonably expect that this assessment of a lack of individualized curricula would lead to changes more in keeping with curricular innovation. By contrast, this lack of confidence in the educational curriculum triggered the call for schools to go ‘back to the basics.’ The problem, people believed, was that in spite of changes or ‘reforms’ to the school system, children seem to be learning less and less, finishing their education without acquiring basic skills like reading, writing and arithmetic. The reasoning underlying this ‘back to the basics’ mantra is that schools must not be teaching the basics, and further, that what they are currently doing has replaced the teaching of basic educational skills. This reasoning reflects a way of thinking about education and educational resources in which there is only so much education to go around and any innovation must be ‘purchased’ at the expense of a basic skill.”<sup>xviii</sup> As one participant stated:

*I think we have just wandered away from basic hard education, thinking that a lot of fancy window dressings suddenly creates a better educational system, and it doesn't.*

*Peer Discourse Informant, Boston Mixed Race, Mixed Ed Group<sup>xix</sup>*

In these Peer Discourse Sessions, FrameWorks' research informants consistently emphasized "the basics" as the enduring foundation for skills development. According to this way of thinking, if education is not working, it is because we have abandoned teaching those skills that are perceived as critical to all future learning: reading, writing and arithmetic. "The basics" is a pervasive script and is problematic, of course, because it considers only a narrow set of skills as foundational. Advocates for reform should be aware that opening up a conversation about the skills necessary to achieve is likely to inadvertently cue this "basics" script that lodges a narrow set of skills at the front of all educational success. This thinking undermines considerations of innovative approaches to education and places the emphasis on knowledge acquisition to the exclusion of cognitive, social and emotional learning and development. When the conversation is about "the basics," it is easy to disregard the contributions of music, art, global issues and other less traditional courses that advocates and experts consider important to learning.

*The kids don't have a common sense or awareness in high school that grade school kids in my era had. They know next to nothing about geography. They know less about history. Their math skills are totally inadequate. Their reading and spelling abilities are extremely limited. Most kids today who finish college have the equivalent awareness that I had when I finished high school.*

*Boston Peer Discourse Session, Mixed Race, Mixed Ed Group<sup>xx</sup>*

Third, the most visible reform mentioned by research participants – a kind of universal panacea – was more computers in the classroom. When education reform was described as equipping children with 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, most people thought narrowly about computer-related skills. Thus the notion of "modernizing" the system has the effect of narrowly defining necessary innovations.

*I think the first thing I would think about would be technology. It's true when you look at what a classroom day is for a child now, is very similar to what a classroom day was for me, except when they leave the classroom, you know, they're texting all the time. I mean, the "technology" alone – integrating that into different levels of education would be a significant change, and something that needs to happen with the way that children access any kind of information or knowledge.*

*Liberal Woman, age 40, On-the-street interviews, unpublished transcript*

- 4. Crisis thinking, while common, leads to caution and conservatism, not innovation and transformation.** Americans of every stripe and location find it easy to agree on education's utter and dismal failure. The observation that "education in America is broken" runs like a constant refrain throughout FrameWorks' individual interviews and peer discourse sessions. FrameWorks researchers observed: "While one might expect this to lend support to broad educational reforms, instead this type of thinking does little to help people see solutions to educational problems...Note as well that this crisis thinking is generally sketchy and tends to quickly exhaust the informants' sense of the issue."<sup>xxi</sup> When this line of thinking is pursued, people actually become more cautious than they appear to be on the surface. While they often talk about and agree that we should dramatically change the education system, what they really have in mind are minor changes that constitute relatively conservative reforms. Even as they admit that the education system is broken, they are afraid that education reform might put their own or their children's educational resources and access in jeopardy. This fear constrains broader policy thinking and the willingness to imagine what a dramatically reformed system would look like. In response to a framed inquiry to think about the *root causes* that prevent the American education system from performing well, informants quickly became overwhelmed, echoing the weariness we observed in peer discourse sessions:

*I think the "root causes" are so vast that there's no way you are going to fix them at any level that's going to resolve problems that we're dealing with today. You can look at the root problems of "family life." You can look at the root problems of "social life." You can look at the root problems of "community." You can look at the root problems of "mental illness." Whatever the case may be, you can become so caught up in those "root problems," and trying on how to fix those that you forget the "idea" – the "big picture," which is let's get our kids educated. You know, stop worrying about what is going on in their social environment, or the family environment, and focus on what's going on in the classroom.*

*Independent Man, age 48, On-the-street interviews, unpublished transcript*

*Oh, like yeah. I mean, I think it's obvious that needs to be done, but again, you know, "technically," how is that going to be done. I think we've only scratched the surface, and that's been okay for a while, and I mean, it's obvious that that would be the place to go. It's just, how do you do that? I don't know if that's realistic in our society...you're not gonna fix the problem.*

*Liberal Woman, 38, On-the-street interviews, unpublished transcript*

In our cognitive media analysis, we also found this to be a fairly common theme in

coverage of education reform: an extensive discussion about the enormity and intractability of the root problems at the heart of the challenges engulfing the educational system. For example:

*About 98 percent of Newton students are poor enough to receive a free lunch, while the rest pay a reduced price. Many are from single-parent homes supported by welfare, some are in foster care and a few children are homeless, though the school does not track exact numbers. Every year, the school organizes as many as five support groups for students who are coping with losses, like the imprisonment of a parent or the shooting of a sibling or a friend. A newspaper article posted in the main office told of a former Newton student gunned down this month. Sarah Paul, the school counselor and a former teacher, said that she knew of a half dozen Newton alumni killed by street violence in the last few years. When she was teaching sixth grade, Ms. Paul said she once had a student who kept laying his head on the desk. He told her, "I didn't sleep well last night because they were shooting around my way." Newton teachers say they are keenly aware that such hardships can distract their students and undermine their academic progress. ("For a School, Hope and a Fresh Start," *The New York Times*, Section 14LI, Pg. 1, September 16, 2007.)*

Interestingly, this is much the same pattern FrameWorks has observed with respect to health care reform;<sup>xxii</sup> people believe the system is broken but this leads them to be suspicious about change and to circle the wagons around their existing route to access. Without a series of incremental reforms that move toward a logical restructuring of the system, people are not inclined to support reform that is portrayed as dramatic change.

Both the tone and content of the crisis message are problematic for education reformers. Invoking concepts such as transformation, reinvention or blowing up the system tends to overwhelm people, reminding them that education is a political football and making them even more cynical about solutions. The crisis content is too big to incite a sense of agency over the reform process. Ironically, people are more likely to embrace larger reforms if the process of reform is broken into smaller pieces. Put simply, talk overhaul and you get little or no reform; talk step by step and you get bigger reforms. This is what FrameWorks sometimes refers to as "the illogic of literalness."

5. **A lack of agency with respect to changing the education system leads to a defensive posture that favors a consumerist "me and my kid" approach to educational issues.** FrameWorks' informants were so cynical about their ability to effect any changes whatsoever in what is perceived to be a dysfunctional education system that they instead focused narrowly on getting the best educational product and advantage for their own children, while commiserating with other parents. When faced with the enormity of the broken system, they chose to invest their

energies where they thought they were needed most and had the best chance of succeeding: in interceding for their own children with teachers and other school officials. These encounters comprise a set of often-repeated horror stories that underscore the brokenness of the system but also particularize it in ways that do not make policy solutions obvious. Peer discourse participants assumed that "... 'the system' is going to be unfair and ineffective, or at best, perpetually in need of improvement, intrinsically flawed, problematic and inflexible. These characteristics were taken as 'givens' in the discourse, requiring little debate, negotiation or discussion."<sup>xxiii</sup>

*It takes parents to yell and scream and fuss and write letters to certain people to get this thing together, but we don't want to do it.*

*Peer Discourse Participant, (Memphis, African American, Low Ed Group)*

*It is a combination of things that determine why our system is failing, and until people stop pointing a finger and say, "what can I do to make it better," it is not going to get better.*

*Peer Discourse Participant, (Indianapolis, Mixed Race, Low Ed Group)<sup>xxiv</sup>*

This perspective also made it difficult for people to view education as a public good or as serving a common purpose. Importantly, this stance contributed to the widely held assumption that education is about the acquisition of individual achievement. Once people perceive quality education as a limited commodity, they quickly circle the wagons around their own children, seeing the acquisition of education as inevitably pitting one child against another in a race to the top. When this competitive mindset is cued up, people find it difficult to understand why people on one side of town should care about the education system on the other side of town, or why parents who have already raised their children should continue to pay for public education.

**Interviewer:** *Why do you think the government should be spending money to educate everyone?*

**Informant:** *I still can't understand, when you don't have kids in school, why you continue to pay the taxes... I don't know. They just want the money [LAUGHS]. That's the one thing that baffles me. You think after your kids are grown and everything they should give you that little break.*

*White Conservative Woman, age 56, Connecticut<sup>xxv</sup>*

Tackling the issue of agency is likely to require more than framing. People need to be able to see the results of reforms in order to be encouraged to continue moving forward. They need to see the system as responsive to their input, but ultimately to see accountability of the system to the society as a whole, not merely to each individual

parent.

In the sections above, we have focused on those ways of thinking that are “top of mind,” or easily available to guide thinking about education and reform. In the following sections, we focus on more “recessive” ways of thinking that nevertheless harbor the potential to more closely align public and expert thinking. Here we identify ideas that people can indeed discuss and use as the basis for reasoning, but require more effort on the part of both communicator and discussant. The more dominant ways of thinking tend to crowd out these less familiar paths of reasoning. However, with effective reframing cues, FrameWorks’ research demonstrates how these more obscure patterns can be invigorated and with what positive results.

- 6. Individualized and consumerist approaches to education make it difficult, but not impossible, for people to see education as an engine that drives national prosperity and as an investment we all make in the country’s future.** While people believe that a broadly educated public is indeed important for the future of the nation, this argument is not one that they hear with any regularity. FrameWorks’ media content analysis found only 2 percent of all coverage devoted to the general societal costs of addressing, or not addressing, education reform.<sup>xxvi</sup> As a consequence, people are “rusty” in pursuing this line of thinking. It is important that communicators remind people of the numerous ways that education benefits society: from public health to innovation to community stability to quality of life.

*I think the purpose of education is to prepare you for adulthood, to live on your own. You can’t live with your parents forever and you have to have some type of foundation to support yourself whether it be financially, emotionally, or anything.*

*White Liberal Woman, age 29, California<sup>xxvii</sup>*

*[The higher education system is working well] because people are paying for it. So they insist that it works well.*

*White Independent Woman, age 50-59, New Hampshire<sup>xxviii</sup>*

One might easily conclude, on the basis of participant observation, that the concept of education as a collective investment is not at all on people’s radar. Yet, the reframing research we conducted shows clearly that, with the right cue, people can indeed perceive education as a societal investment.

- 7. When the goal of education is explicitly described as the future preparation needed to maintain and support our country’s quality of life, people understand**

**that a new set of skills and experiences are necessary.** FrameWorks took an adapted form of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills frame commonly in use among experts and advocates and refined it over the course of our peer discourse sessions, TalkBack Testing and quantitative experiments. Put simply, this frame generally emphasizes that students in the U.S. lag behind those of other countries in developing the kinds of skills required to succeed in the workplace of the future. Importantly, we stripped this frame of many problematic elements. For example, in our execution of this frame, we conscientiously avoided ideas of individual achievement and success, which made people think about their own individual situation and not about the public policies that might ameliorate that situation more generally. We also eliminated common appeals to compete in the global economy. These appeals depressed people and made them think that the Chinese or Japanese would ultimately win this battle because of their discipline and emphasis on the basics, on the one hand, and because of a widespread belief the U.S. has fallen behind other nations in education, on the other. It is important to note that this belief does not serve a useful purpose of engagement. We also avoided the emphasis on skills which defaulted immediately to either computer skills or “the basics.”

Instead, we crafted a value that asserts the need to update our existing system in order to prepare children now to live in a rapidly changing world. This value stressed that we would be adding new skills to the traditional curriculum, not subtracting from it. This value (shown on page 19) allowed people to see a common goal for education and to get over their attraction to more limited approaches. Moreover, it allowed people to see why their own past education would not be sufficient for the present and future. It created an opening for informants to a more meaningful conversation about innovative approaches to curriculum and education reforms. This result built upon observations in the peer discourse sessions that, when primed to talk about education as a necessary public service, participants tended to move away from thinking in terms of educating the individual and what individuals needed to do to be successful, in favor of a pattern of thinking that emphasized the need to educate the collective whole and the negative impact on society when the system fails to provide citizens with a high quality education.<sup>xxix</sup>

This way of thinking, while recessive, is nevertheless available to people and amenable to framing.

8. **When people can see the system of education and the need to coordinate its different parts for the good of the whole, they become more expansive in their thinking about how and where reform might take place.**<sup>xxx</sup> In FrameWorks’ peer discourse sessions, we quite literally forced people to consider roles for an array of actors in education reform. While they were able to perform these tasks, and readily admitted that communities and taxpayers, for example, had important roles to play in

education, these actors quickly dropped out of their thinking after the exercise was completed and the conversation defaulted back to the “Tangible Triad” of parent, teacher and child. However, when provided with the metaphor of an orchestra that has multiple sections, which must be coordinated in pursuit of a common goal, and needs strong leadership as well as skilled staff, resources and up-to-date instruments – this powerfully reoriented ordinary Americans to think systemically about the parts of the education system and its need for coordination. The orchestra metaphor is further explained in the Redirections section of this MessageMemo. This recessive systems thinking requires such concrete framing strategies to overcome the dominant cultural models described above.

- 9. When people can see reform as a practical act or as a set of methodical steps toward an ultimate goal, they gain agency and become more enthusiastic about education reforms.** When asked to think about reform as akin to remodeling, drawing from their own associations with updating structures such as kitchens or bathrooms, people become far more optimistic that education reform is a practical approach that will yield positive outcomes. Put in this way, education reform becomes structural, not merely superficial. It is seen as part of a process of assessment and prioritization, yielding a plan that puts first things first, but may go on to have subsequent waves of reform. It connects reforms to real needs, and it allows for accountability along the way. Importantly, it allows education reformers to connect to a more populist discussion about reform, one that may sound less visionary but yields reforms that are ultimately more in keeping with a big vision. Because practical solutions are recessive in thinking, the dominant crisis thinking tends to crowd out this line of reasoning, requiring more strategic framing. The remodeling metaphor is further explained in the Redirections section of this MessageMemo.

*You have to look at the whole picture and see what needs to be updated, changed, and what is maybe outdated, and [needs to be] removed. I would say that it might make sense to step back and assess what it is, and where it is now, and where we want to go with it because a lot of things change over time, and if the system was designed at some point in the past that doesn't really respond 100% to the way society is structured now, then that's gonna cause problems, inefficiencies, and whatnot. So, I would say that one of the things that would make sense is to figure out how that system fits into what's happening now, and what's gonna be happening tomorrow. But I think it's better to work on something that already exists than start from scratch. Like, if you were remodeling a house, it's better to do something that already exists than try to build it from scratch.*

*Conservative Man, age 46, On-the-street interviews, unpublished transcript*

*I think that it [the education system] needs to be remodeled, but when you totally remodel a building, you tear down walls. Maybe not the outside structures but the*



*inside structures. You actually go in, and you say, okay, is this a bearing wall? Is this something I truly need in this house? Okay, I truly need to teach my children conjunctions, and adjectives, and I need to teach them math; I need to teach them science; I need to teach them basics. Those are the bearing walls of education. But [the question is] “how” I teach it to them. We need to look outside of our education system, and say, “How does this child learn?” What’s the best way for this child to learn? Maybe the best way for this child to learn is through music. Maybe the best way for this child to learn is by touching things, and hands on. So you would have to tear down walls.*

*Independent Woman, age 55, On-the-street interviews, unpublished transcript*

**10. Individual education reforms need to be contextualized by values and simplifying models<sup>xxxii</sup> if they are to avoid people’s tendency to default to strong, entrenched patterns of thinking that undermine meaningful reforms.**

FrameWorks’ media content analysis revealed a cacophony of solutions, with more than 1,000 opinions on what should be done to fix the education system in the 14 months of coverage examined. Grouping these solutions into broad categories, only six themes garnered more than 100 mentions: changes in instruction, increases in financial support, changes in teacher work rules such as merit pay or tenure, modifying the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), educator training and new programs.<sup>xxxii</sup> This fragmentation is unlikely to support a focused discussion on policy alternatives. This is important because experts and advocates often assume that the public can quickly grasp the thinking behind particular policy proposals. Especially when these proposals are relatively arcane, more communications time is spent explaining the policy details than in situating the proposals in a common American value and then explaining them. In the case of education and education reform, beginning the conversation with contextual elements such as values and simplifying models is imperative if people are to appreciate a different set of changes to the education system, changes aligned more closely with those prescribed by education reform experts. Put simply, people can see the bigger picture as a result of framing cues but they are unlikely to get there on their own.

Without a value that explains education as a shared investment in our country’s future, without a vista that is bigger than the “Tangible Triad” of parent-teacher-student, and without a way of getting their hands around reform, ordinary people will remain alienated from education, skeptical of reforms and ill-equipped to consider systemic changes. By contrast, when a discussion was primed with a values-based statement or narrative, participants in FrameWorks’ peer discourse sessions were able to do more policy thinking, “ranging from making classrooms smaller and giving principals more control over the hiring and firing of teachers, to having a community emphasis on nutrition and health ... to having schools function as large community centers more broadly. While not all ideas offered by

participants constitute feasible policy directions, the primes did open up a space for participants to think very broadly about the possibilities for educational reform.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> Order always matters in framing public issues, but order matters more than usual on issues of education and education reform.

The challenge of reframing the issue of education, then, is to understand and avoid the dominant negative associations that people make instantaneously and to use frame elements such as values and simplifying models to evoke and concretize better ways of thinking. These patterns may be more recessive in people’s minds but, with effective cues, can drive better reasoning.

## II. Redirections

In this section, we provide specific recommendations for redirecting public thinking toward more productive conversations about education and education reform, conversations that are in closer alignment to expert understanding. These reframing strategies are drawn directly from the situation analysis above and designed to counter or redirect public thinking. Finally, these recommendations emerge from FrameWorks’ iterative method of both qualitative and quantitative research. As such, they draw upon an approach to framing analysis and reframing recommendations that is attentive to various frame elements and their respective power in overcoming unproductive patterns of thinking. These include: (1) Values that orient public thinking to what’s at stake; (2) explanatory metaphors called Simplifying Models that concretize and simplify the fundamental mechanisms that underlie a particular process or issue; (3) the tone of a communications which, when argumentative, can dampen engagement; and (4) the presence of context or thematic narratives and the use of causal chains to overcome documented tendencies to attribute social problems to individual acts or deficiencies. These and other critical frame elements are explained in a series of FrameWorks webinars available at <http://frameworksinstitute.org/webinars.html>.

### DO:

- Start with the Value of Future Preparation. For example:

*When we think about our country’s future, we need to consider how we can do more to prepare our population to meet future challenges. While we will continue to need the basics, we will also need to add new skills and to update our education system so that it prepares all Americans for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. When we don’t prepare for new challenges, our education system isn’t working the way it should to maintain and advance our country’s quality of life. We could improve our country’s prospects for the future if we used our education system to prepare for life and work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

**What's important to include in this frame:**

1. This is a challenge to our country's future.
2. We need to retain the basics but bring in new skills as well.
3. It makes sense to plan now for the world of tomorrow.

**What's important to leave out of this frame:**

1. This is about global competition.
2. This is about replacing old skills with new skills.
3. This is about individual preparation for tomorrow.

- Use the Orchestra simplifying model to help people imagine a complete education system and to consider the relationships among its parts. Use this model to enumerate the parts of the system that people cannot automatically see: superintendents, principals, school boards, communities, etc. Try to broaden the perspective from a narrow portrait of a classroom to a landscape of many actors and institutions. Use the model to put forward the need for coordination among the parts of the whole because this sets the stage for many kinds of transformational reforms. Here is an example:

*Our nation's educational system is like an orchestra: like an orchestra, it has many groups of players with specialized jobs, such as school boards, taxpayers, families, teachers, principals and administrators. The orchestra sounds best when each musician is skilled, the instruments are well-tuned, and the sections work together in harmony toward the common goal of playing the best music they can. But a changing America and world have handed the orchestra new music to play, and they haven't gotten in sync yet or rehearsed the new repertoire enough to be ready to perform it. No orchestra becomes great overnight, and the beauty of the music depends on lots of small steps, dedicated practice by musicians who have all the resources they need, and an orchestra conductor who can create harmony among all the parts. We can use this orchestra theory to guide how we approach education reform.*

**What's important to include in this frame:**

1. **Orchestras have multiple sections**, being concrete and specific as to what the "sections" of the education system would be.
2. **What makes an orchestra "good"**; the need for strong individual players and sections, but most importantly that these sections must be coordinated and working in concert towards a common goal.

3. **The challenge that orchestras and education face** in the form of changing contexts.
  4. **The step-by-step, gradual process** by which orchestras become great.
  5. Orchestras and education systems **need resources and strong, capable conductors** to play their best music.
- Use the Remodeling simplifying model to help people understand how reform works – what it would do, how it would go about doing it, with what practical results. Here is an example:

*When you remodel a house, you do more than just repaint it: you make substantial changes, keeping the previous shape of the house, but updating old parts, and making the house more modern, and efficient. Like a general contractor, we have to remodel our educational system so that it enables our society to thrive in today's world. Right now, our educational system is an old house that doesn't do a good job of educating our children or providing society with the skills that America needs. The bad news is that remodeling creates temporary dust, noise, and inconvenience; but the good news is that when you remodel you don't have to start from scratch — you strengthen what's working and fix what's not. If we approach educational reform as remodeling, not demolishing, we will be more successful in giving our children what they need.*

#### **What's important to include in this frame:**

1. **The pragmatic, functional and serious work** of remodeling — remodeling is not just about superficial changes but entails significant changes to the structure and functionality of a building.
  2. Remodeling entails **assessment of what is working and what's not** — what is working is kept and built on and what is not working is fixed.
  3. The goal of remodeling is to better allow us to **meet our current needs and goals**.
  4. Remodeling is hard work, but not a complete re-do — **it does not entail blowing up the system** or starting from scratch.
- Introduce specific education reforms after you have established the context: the societal goals for education, a description of a fuller education system and the role of reform.
- Use Fairness Between Places to focus attention on the differential access to material resources between places that often undercut the ability of education systems to educate

kids. That is, when equity is the explicit focus of the reform being advanced, Fairness Between Places should be part of the message. Here is an example:

*It is important that we recognize that programs and services are not equally distributed across all communities in our country. Some communities are struggling because they are not given a fair chance to do well. When some communities are denied the resources they need, they are unable to overcome problems like poor health and education. We need to level the playing field so that every community has access to quality health and education programs and services. Some education reforms would allocate societal assets more fairly among communities, whether they are rural or poor.*

**What’s important to include in this frame:**

1. This is a problem with the distribution of resources, not with bad people.
2. There are consequences that are unfair as a result of this uneven distribution.
3. It can be resolved without taking away from some to give to others.

**What’s important to leave out of this frame:**

1. This is about competition for individual success.
  2. Some people are willfully disadvantaging others.
- Talk about education reform as the practical, pragmatic work that America needs to do from time to time to update its education system to meet new challenges.
  - Talk about the continual skills updating that teachers need to get students ready for 21<sup>st</sup> century jobs. When the teacher is part of a remodeling of the curriculum that must get students ready for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, people can understand why updating teacher skills would be important as well.
  - Talk about “the basics” PLUS innovative skills; that children *do* need to be strong in the basic skills, but that innovative skills can also be part of the package without crowding out “the basics”; that this is not a zero sum situation in which basics drop out when innovation is added.
  - Explain that children develop skills by being in good educational systems that focus on child and adolescent *development*; don’t be afraid to contextualize and ground discussions of educationally appropriate curricula in developmental processes<sup>xxxiv</sup> .
  - To overcome the dismissal of pre-K as “babysitting,” explain that the foundation for child

development is established in the early years with particular emphasis on brain architecture and the role that consistent, stimulating experiences (Serve and Return) play in shaping Executive Function.<sup>xxxv</sup>

- Be specific about what constitutes effective teaching and learning, using clear examples of both. This will help counter the assumption that teachers need only to be caring, and will underscore the importance of teacher training and experience. When the teacher is part of an orchestra of coordinated forces that create learning, people can understand what might shape classroom outcomes beyond student effort.
- To help overcome the narrow focus on discipline and the 3R's, talk about *skills and abilities* and the fact that children develop the skills that they will use both in education and in life through active *training* and by *engaging* in tasks that require them to practice these skills; that skills development is an active rather than passive process.
- Make sure to explain how specific interventions (policies and programs) that are in place in some situations would change the outcomes that affect society – like having a productive workforce or developing a population with the skills, abilities, and training to help solve problems and contribute to the strength of our country – things that affect us all. This can be accomplished by using the framing device known as causal chains, in which seemingly disparate factors are explicitly linked.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

## DON'T

- Define the end goal of reform as educational achievement, which quickly defaults to individualistic thinking.
- Evoke the Crisis Frame or talk about how widely and deeply broken the education system is; you invite despair and disengagement and depress agency.
- Talk about education reform in utopian or revolutionary terms; this tone will likely label you as a helpless idealist, at best, or scare people in terms of the size of the change, at worst.
- Begin your communication by focusing on parents, students or teachers; any of these cues will lead to the powerful dead-end triad that inspires individualistic and mentalist thinking.
- Assume that mention of the “Achievement Gap” will effectively prime people to see disparities in education outcomes; do not focus attention on differences in outcomes between individuals or groups but rather on the inputs and resources needed by all education systems to achieve positive outcomes and how these resources are unevenly

distributed across places.

- Use historical references or any cue that would invite nostalgia; these will incite the “back to the future” thinking that favors “the basics” and the 3 Rs over real reform and innovation.
- Use the phrase “computer-assisted learning” to explain what reform looks like; this will reduce the reform to a simplistic equation of “buy the kids computers and we’re done with it,” or the belief that computer access is the silver bullet for fixing the education system.
- Talk about caring teachers; this trope undervalues the professionalism and training of teachers and is likely to further proposals to use unqualified bystanders to solve teacher shortages.
- Talk about the need for policies that create more *motivation* and *discipline* in students; this cues a powerful way of thinking about how individual students and parents are *exclusively* responsible for educational outcomes and dissuades consideration of the public’s or policy’s role in reforming education.
- Talk about the need to bolster basic skills like reading, writing or arithmetic; this inhibits and blocks thinking about more innovative approaches to skills, teaching and learning.
- Leave people to connect the dots between what they want, how to get there, and what impact it would have on society; they can’t do this by themselves.

### III. Traps in Public Thinking

In this section, we list those aspects of the commonly available cultural models about education and education reform that, while appearing to offer advantages, in fact trap thinking into unproductive routes and ruts. Traps are features of the mental landscape that are enticing to communicators because they fit so well with the ways the public routinely thinks about the issue. The problem, as described in the situation analysis above, is that communicating within these existing dominant patterns works against the end goals of progressive reforms. Like quicksand, traps need to be understood, anticipated and circumvented if real reframing is to take place. While somewhat redundant with the above analysis, we offer this as a checklist against which communicators can evaluate their communications to make sure that they have not opportunistically seized upon a frame that is “easy to think” but does not serve to move thinking in the direction of the communicator’s ultimate goal. While all reframes take advantage of some way of thinking already in mind, the tendency to seize upon these particularly obvious and well travelled routes can prove derailing when the models you choose to activate in the public’s mind are not carefully vetted.

1. **The Crisis Trap.** Advocates sometimes presume that they must make their issue “big” in order to elicit an appropriately serious response from the public. However, by evoking crisis, you may play to a familiar and widely accepted condemnation of the American education system. FrameWorks’ research shows that, once crisis is evoked, people are no more likely to engage in reform, to think they can have an impact, nor to embrace changes that are transformational. There is no new information being communicated by this frame, so it leaves people without the cognitive clues they need to solve the problem. Moreover, it is likely to result in “crisis fatigue,” a kind of mental weariness that arises from exposure to the daily news drumbeat of financial crises, international crises, etc. Instead, talk about the importance of Future Preparation for our society and the need to update and remodel our existing system to meet that challenge. This framing provides far more tangible directions to solutions.
2. **The Skills Trap.** Advocates will be tempted to talk about skills, assuming this is a fairly value-neutral discussion. FrameWorks’ research shows that, when people think about skills without aid of additional framing, they focus on “the basics” or computers. Avoid this trap by talking first about the Future Preparation Americans will need to learn and work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and then explain that this will require both retaining old skills like the basics as well as updating our curricula with new skills. By using “basics plus” and identifying explicitly what the “plus” is, you can counteract the assumption that “21<sup>st</sup> century skills” equals “computers.” You can also use the Remodeling metaphor effectively here, i.e., new skills must be built into the structure of education as we go about remodeling our system to make it work for the future.
3. **The Consumer Trap.** This trap is so subtle that advocates may not realize they are falling into it. When education is thought of as a commodity that individuals should acquire and that acquiring more of this product is inherently better, this signals to people that education is a product like any other. Reasoning along this line, it is only natural that some people will be able to afford more of it or better varieties of it. You get what you can afford; if you want more or better, you must work harder to purchase it. This way of thinking makes it harder for people to consider education’s societal benefits and to understand, for example, why taxpayers continue to support education when their own children are grown. One antidote to the consumer trap is to emphasize that education is a public structure upon which our society relies, and to explain its maintenance and repair in terms of Remodeling. Another is to evoke the notion of common good and education’s contribution to America’s future prosperity.
4. **The Individual Achievement Trap.** When advocates talk about education in terms of individual achievement, they essentially privatize the discussion. This way of talking reminds people of their strong beliefs in individual responsibility. Once cued, people will see each individual as responsible for securing his or her own education, and will



overlook what is at stake for society in having an educated workforce, and what policies need to be put in place to make the system work better for everyone. In general, if the solution is policy-oriented, the problem statement should not happen at the individual level. Instead, talk about society's stake in education. And do so with respect to civic functions and the stability of communities, not merely as an aggregation of individual strivers.

5. **The Achievement Gap Trap.** When advocates use the metaphor of a “gap,” it tends to set up zero sum thinking, or the notion that any addition to one party will be made at the expense of another. When they raise the specter of redistributing finite resources (as opposed to repair and maintenance of an improved system that benefits all), they raise the fear that educational resources will be taken away. By contrast, when people are reminded of the value of Fairness Between Places, i.e., that education is largely paid for through local property taxes, they can understand why some communities would have inferior education systems. (For more about how to talk about disparities, see *FrameWorks’ Talking About Disparities Toolkit*.)
6. **The Populist Trap.** When people reason about the need for new skills and educational experiences, without helpful framing, they are often skeptical of that assertion. They argue that “we turned out OK” and we never had pre-K, personalized learning, accelerated college access, etc. This is a populist backlash to what are considered “fancy” proposals, as opposed to practical ones. This backlash is further prompted when advocates use visionary language to communicate about education reform. Both metaphorical models – Orchestra and Remodeling – get over this tendency by rooting education and education reform in the common experiences of ordinary people.
7. **The Caring Teachers Trap.** When caring is described as the chief characteristic of good teachers, people tend to ignore the importance of teacher training and knowledge, experience or expertise in subject areas. Moreover, the emphasis in education shifts to the teacher's motivation and effort, not to the larger system of resources and rewards in which they teach. Both the Orchestra and Remodeling metaphors offer ways around this. When the teacher is part of an orchestra of coordinated forces that create learning, we can understand what might shape classroom outcomes. When the teacher is part of a remodeling of the curriculum to get students ready for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we can understand why updating teacher skills would be important as well. Communications should illuminate the teaching process in ways that get beyond caring individuals and demonstrate the effects of teacher competencies.
8. **The Mentalist Trap.** When education is reduced to the Tangible Triad of parents, students and teachers, and described as a problem or in crisis, people logically infer that the problem lies with the “internal machinery” or what lies inside of these actors, not in anything beyond them. Explanations for bad outcomes, then, are reduced to issues of effort, will, discipline, etc. Parents are blamed, “kids these days” are blamed or teachers

are blamed; the latter are often blamed for paying more attention to their pay scale than to the individual needs of children. In this way, unions are seen as threats to the caring teacher. Instead of focusing narrowly on *people*, describe challenges to the education *system*; both Orchestra and Remodeling help make this shift.

#### IV. Gaps in Understanding

Separate and distinct from the traps that tempt advocates to frame education in unproductive ways are false assumptions about what background information is available to ordinary people on any given subject. Experts often assume that the public has knowledge that it does not have. A gap in understanding becomes problematic if it is so wide that the models commonly employed by the public to think about the concept take them in directions that are markedly divergent from the experts' understanding. At the same time, these gaps represent promising opportunities for frame elements like simplifying models and values to quickly connect public thinking to the more developed and elaborate understandings that experts have acquired over time. Importantly, these gaps cannot be filled with unframed facts, with rebuttals or with arguments that repeat the dominant models. Communicators, many of whom have significant expertise on the topic of education, can use this list to check their assumptions about public knowledge that may be reflected in their materials.

**Gap #1: Collective Benefits of Education vs. Individual Success.** Experts and advocates see education as critical to any society's future prosperity and its stability. They see education as constituting not only an economic engine, but also as contributing to a country's quality of life. In sum, they assume the collective benefits derived from an educated populace. While the public also believes this to be true, it is not at the top of their minds. Consumerist and individual patterns of thinking dominate this conversation, as on many American issues. Communicators can bridge this gap by priming the conversation with the value of Future Preparation, not for individual success but rather to support our country's future development and quality of life.

**Gap #2: Rich Interactive System of Educational Players vs. The Tangible Triad.** Experts and advocates understand that education is a system that encompasses many actors and resources. By contrast, the public sees only parent-teacher-student, the classroom and the school. Communicators can bridge this gap by using the Orchestra metaphor to remind people of the multiple parts of the system, naming these parts, and emphasizing how they can be coordinated in order to produce better outcomes.

**Gap #3: A Role for Community vs. Classroom and Home.** Experts and advocates understand that education can happen in many settings and includes community resources to advance learning and offer new experiences. The public, however, rarely mentions education as happening in the community. They struggle even to see what resources exist there that might be applied to education. When a role for community is raised as a

possibility, people worry that something (the basics) might be lost in the bargain. Communicators can bridge this gap by priming with Future Preparation, using the Orchestra metaphor to create a wider vista for education, and then explaining the missed opportunities when we do not fully use the wide array of educational players.

**Gap #4: Weighing the Impacts of Various Reforms vs. No Solutions.** Experts and advocates understand that reforms to the education system are possible, practical and expedient. Most are excited by the possibilities of rethinking and remaking the system into a better fit for the country's future. The public is often entrenched in an assessment of education as yet another intractable system that eludes improvement year after year. Communicators can bridge this gap by using the Remodeling metaphor to get reform into the vernacular and out of more utopian language, and providing concrete examples of programmatic and structural changes that yield better outcomes. The important thing is to avoid examples of "best schools" or "best students." When confronted with this kind of exceptionalism, people wonder why all schools or students can't do the same. In other words, the exception proves the rule,<sup>xxxvii</sup> cueing up mentalist explanations of effort to explain why some succeed and others don't.

**Gap #5: Differential Resources as Reasons for Disparities vs. Differential Effort.** Experts and advocates understand that disparities in educational outcomes are tied closely to the resources available to poor and minority communities. If this is not carefully explained, however, the public can be reminded of the intractability of poverty, negative assessments of minority and ethnic groups, etc. What's missing is the link between resources and outcomes. Communicators can bridge this gap by using the value of Fairness Between Places to demonstrate that there are problems in the distribution of goods that support education, due to the fact that education is supported largely by local taxes, and this in turn puts schools in some areas at a disadvantage, especially in their ability to acquire the professionally trained teachers and curricula they will need to prepare these students for 21<sup>st</sup> century jobs.

We urge experts to recognize those places where public thinking is likely to break down and to create better explanatory bridges by using tested frame elements and strategies.

## V. Next Steps

FrameWorks will continue to refine and test values that increase policy support for a wide array of educational policies, from early learning to higher education, and include broad systems reform. Additional funding from the Lumina Foundation for Education makes this second round of quantitative testing possible. Moreover, we will be developing a MessageBrief specific to pre-K and an additional MessageMemo on higher education. While both topics have been pursued over the course of the research reported here, and the recommendations held accountable to policies related to both pre-K and higher education, we recognize that these aspects of

education policy may involve a separate set of advocates and, thus, we will focus more specifically on these challenges in subsequent framing documents. This additional research will be available at [www.frameworksinstitute.org/education.html](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/education.html).

## About the Institute

The FrameWorks Institute is a national nonprofit think tank devoted to framing public issues to bridge the divide between public and expert understanding. Its work is based on Strategic Frame Analysis™, a multi-method, multi-disciplinary approach to empirical research. FrameWorks designs, commissions, publishes, explains and applies communications research to prepare nonprofit organizations to expand their constituency base, to build public will, and to further public understanding of specific social issues — the environment, government, race, children’s issues and health care, among others. Its work is unique in its breadth — from qualitative, quantitative and experimental research to applied communications toolkits, eWorkshops, advertising campaigns, FrameChecks™ and Framing Study Circles. See [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org).

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<sup>i</sup> Readers of this MessageMemo who are unfamiliar with FrameWorks’ approach are strongly advised to take advantage of several explanatory guides on our website. For more on this approach, see [www.frameworksinstitute.org/sfa.html](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/sfa.html).

<sup>ii</sup> For more on this method, see the extensive methodology section of this paper posted at [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org).

<sup>iii</sup> For more on framing and reframing, see FrameWorks Institute. (2001). *A Five Minute Refresher Course in Framing*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute, located at [www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/eZines/five\\_minute\\_refresher\\_eZine.pdf](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/eZines/five_minute_refresher_eZine.pdf). For more on the elements of a frame that we use in our reframing recommendations, see our series of webinars at [www.frameworksinstitute.org/webinars.html](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/webinars.html).

<sup>iv</sup> A composite production of on-the-street interviews will be posted at [www.frameworksinstitute.org/education.html](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/education.html) in January 2010.

<sup>v</sup> Center for Media and Public Affairs. (2009). *Put Down Your Pencils Please: Media Coverage of Education Reform 2007 to 2008*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

<sup>vi</sup> Chart, H. with Kendall-Taylor, N. *Reform What? Individualist Thinking in Education: American Cultural Models on Schooling*. 2008:13. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

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- vii Ibid., p. 14.
- viii Ibid., p. 15.
- ix Ibid., p. 24.
- x *Enough Blame to Go Around: Understanding the Public Discourse on Education Reform*. 2009: 17. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
- xi Ibid., p. 13.
- xii Ibid., p. 14.
- xiii Chart, H. with Kendall-Taylor, N.: 21.
- xiv *Enough Blame*, p. 13.
- xv Ibid., p. 14.
- xvi Ibid.
- xvii Ibid., p. 25.
- xviii Ibid., p. 15-16.
- xix Ibid., p. 16.
- xx Ibid., p. 15.
- xxi *A Viewer's Guide to Simplifying Models Research: On-the-Street Interviews with Ordinary Americans*. 2009: 3. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
- xxii See *FrameWorks MessageBrief: Making the Public Case for Health Care Reform* at [www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/health\\_care/health\\_care\\_msg\\_brief.pdf](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/health_care/health_care_msg_brief.pdf).
- xxiii *Enough Blame*, p. 21.
- xxiv Ibid.
- xxv Chart, H. with Kendall-Taylor, N.: 12.
- xxvi Center for Media and Public Affairs.
- xxvii Chart, H. with Kendall-Taylor, N.: 8.
- xxviii Ibid., p. 28.
- xxix *Enough Blame*, p. 7.
- xxx For the research that informs the identification of the simplifying models put forward here, see Kendall-Taylor, N. 2009. *Orchestrating Systems and Remodeling Reform: How Simplifying Models Can Set the Stage for Policy Thinking*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
- xxxi For explanations of these elements of the frame, see [www.frameworksinstitute.org/webinars.html](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/webinars.html).
- xxxii Center for Media and Public Affairs.
- xxxiii *Enough Blame*.
- xxxiv For more on the research base informing this and the subsequent recommendation, see FrameWorks Institute, *Framing Early Child Development MessageBrief*. (2009). Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute, posted at [www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/ECD/ecd\\_message\\_brief\\_2009.pdf](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/ECD/ecd_message_brief_2009.pdf).
- xxxv Ibid.
- xxxvi For more on causal chains, see the webinar that addresses this important framing technique at [www.frameworksinstitute.org/webinars.html](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/webinars.html).
- xxxvii For more on the dangers of exceptionalizing, see Gilliam, Franklin. (2006). *Vivid Examples: What They Mean and Why You Should Be Careful Using Them*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute, posted at [www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/eZines/vivid\\_examples\\_ezine.pdf](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/eZines/vivid_examples_ezine.pdf).