



A FrameWorks Institute eZine
"No Child Left Behind" and the ReFraming of Public Education

The following analysis combines and further analyzes the results of two research reports commissioned by Douglas Gould and Company, Inc. and funded by the Ford Foundation: "Fulfilling the Promise of No Child Left Behind: A MetaAnalysis of Attitudes Toward Public Education" and "No Community Left Behind: Changing the Conversation About Public School Reform." The research base includes: 6 focus groups with engaged citizens, i.e., people who say they: are registered to vote, read the newspaper frequently, are involved in community organizations, and have recently contacted a public official or spoken out on behalf of an issue. In each of three locations (Hartford, CT, Nashville, TN and Baltimore, MD) one focus group was conducted with parents of children in the public schools, and one focus group was conducted with those who currently have no children in the public schools. The full text of the reports is available at www.douglasgould.com.

The No Child Left Behind Act signed into law by President Bush in January 2002 could transform public education for years to come. The real power of NCLB is not in the specific policies it advances, but rather in its potential ability to restructure the way Americans think about education. By communicating education reform through the lens of a Market-based Accountability frame, NCLB proponents are invigorating a consumer perspective of education while subtly undermining a citizen perspective. Over the long-term, this approach could erode the position of education as a public good — with a number of profound entailments. This eZine takes a look at the long-term consequences of promoting this way of thinking and makes some specific recommendations for taking back the framing of education to advance a broader array of reforms.

Decades of communications concerning the problems facing public schools have taken their toll:

Over the past 30 years, people have lost respect and confidence in public schools. In 1973, 58% said they had "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in public schools. That figure has eroded over time and now stands at 38%.¹

While ratings of local public schools have increased since the early 1980s (just 31% rated local schools an "A" or "B" in 1983 while that figure now stands at 47%), ratings of the nation's schools remain low. When thinking of schools nationally, only 24% of adults give schools a grade of "A" or "B," a rating that has remained fairly constant since the early 1980s.²

Americans overwhelmingly believe that "most students achieve only a small part of their academic potential in school" (81%), while only 16% think "most students achieve their full potential."³

"Johnny Can't Read" stories have permeated public consciousness and resulted in a frustrated public that believes the problems are overwhelming, and the solutions nonexistent. In this context, an accountability message is attractive. It causes people to think of business efficiency, as opposed to government waste. Importantly, when this kind of thinking is attached to education, the public begins to think of schools as a business, not a public good. A public good perspective, by contrast, would stress the role that all schools must play in getting children off to a good start and realizing each child's potential.

Responding effectively to the challenges and opportunities of NCLB requires a thorough understanding of the structure of the public's thinking on this issue. There are four dominant mindsets concerning public education. These mindsets are not mutually exclusive. In fact, in focus groups most people voice views related to each of these mindsets under certain circumstances:

Neglectful Parent — parents are the problem facing education. Until parents get involved, additional resources will not make a difference.

Bad Society — society is the problem, and until drugs, crime, and lack of respect are dealt with, education will suffer.

Market-Based Accountability — education is like a product or service, and tests are used to prove that the service is being delivered. If the service is flawed, consumers can make another choice, i.e., public school choice, and the service provider should be forced to fix the product.

Nurturant Community — people see community responsibility for schools, and view testing as a way to diagnose where the problems are that the community needs to fix. Three of these frames of mind provide an advantage to opponents of increased resources for education. One frame, the Nurturant Community, provides an opportunity for advocates of additional resources.

Each of the four mindsets is explored in greater detail below.

Neglectful Parent

"It doesn't matter how much money you throw (at the problem), when you've got kids who come from an environment where their families do not value education, they can learn at school and they go home and there is nobody to reinforce. There is nobody who cares that they went to school, or help with homework or any of that stuff." MD woman

When people are in the Neglectful Parent frame of mind, they see parents as the problem and feel sympathy for schools that have to deal with undisciplined students. The definition of bad parenting includes a variety of different kinds of parents — welfare recipients, drug or alcohol abusers, lenient parents, dual-career couples, etc. If parents are the problem, then calls for increased education budgets become irrelevant. Money cannot fix neglectful parents. Instead, the problem is perceived as so widespread as to be overwhelming and, therefore, irresolvable. The only solutions the public can see are solutions that purport to make up for parental failures, such as allowing schools to discipline or forcing parental involvement.

Bad Society

"I think it is hard to pick on the school system. Baltimore City is plagued with a lot of problems. It's a high crime area and high drug, so you are not just going to correct the education problem when you have a lot of problems in Baltimore City." MD man

When operating in the Bad Society mindset, people see society or community values as the problem, and believe that schools are dealing with the impact of a worsening society — drugs, poverty, and a lack of discipline and respect. When in this mindset, the problems again seem too complex, overwhelming, and irresolvable or untractable. Importantly, they believe funding can do little to address the problems.

Market-Based Accountability

"I think we're running it like a business. You do well; you thrive, you succeed. You don't do well, you're out of business." CT woman

Accountability language causes the perception of schools to shift from sympathy to blame. Instead of dealing with the consequences of poor parenting or a bad society, schools themselves become the problem. In this mindset, schools are like a business, education is a purchased service, and consumers (taxpayers) deserve proof that they are getting what they pay for. In this mindset, standards define expectations for service and tests offer the proof that the service was delivered. If the service was not delivered, it is because teachers and principals are not working hard enough — they have no incentive to perform. Therefore, the service provider (schools) should be held accountable for faulty service — cutting funds, changing school leadership or choosing a different school become appropriate actions in this mindset.

Communications about NCLB have been heavily framed as Market-based Accountability, giving more prominence to this way of thinking. Over the long-term, a

Market-based Accountability mindset can have serious negative consequences for public education.

Nurturant Community

"It's going in there and correcting the problems. Now it does cost to do that, but it would benefit our children and our children's children in the long run to do it that way." CT man

This frame of mind is currently the weakest of the four, but the Nurturant Community mindset is unique in its ability to lead to more significant support for public education if it is invigorated. When in this frame of mind, people see that the community has a stake in the success of schools. Tests are used to diagnose problems, not to punish or embarrass schools. The public expects that resources would be tailored to fix the unique set of issues the school or district faces. Providing additional resources, including but not limited to funding, is the result of this mindset.

Additionally, there are two high level values that are tied to the Nurturant Community way of thinking — opportunity and future. Advocates can invigorate the Nurturant Community mindset and motivate citizens to act by incorporating the values of "opportunity" and "future generations" into their communications.

Let's explore how each of these frames can direct public reasoning. The public recognizes that schools differ based on their community's income. Schools in high-income areas are viewed the most positively (69% say they are excellent or good). This compares with 42% giving a positive rating to schools in middle-income areas, and just 12% to schools in low-income areas.⁴ When in the Neglectful Parent mindset, a person might reason that schools in low-income areas are worse off because the parents in low income areas place less value on education.. In the Bad Society mindset, a person would point to drugs or violence as the cause of poor education. When in the Market-based Accountability mindset, people suggest that those people who care about education move to the areas with a good public education system, and every family has the ability to do the same. Finally, when in the Nurturant Community mindset, people insist that children in low-income areas should have the same resources and opportunities to achieve as children in high-income areas. Importantly, only the reasoning that takes place in the Nurturant Community mindset leads to additional resources as a logical conclusion.

To communicate effectively, advocates must structure the conversation to trigger the Nurturant Community mindset and to avoid other problematic ways of thinking. The next section offers some recommendations about how to structure such a conversation.

Changing the Conversation

Many advocates have spent significant energy in communicating what is wrong with

NCLB. This approach does not use advocates' limited resources wisely. The public is largely unfamiliar with NCLB — but when they hear about it, they like its broad principles. When asked specifically about the No Child Left Behind Act, a slim majority (56%) states that they have seen, heard or read *something* about it. Given no further information, people tend to favor it (40%) rather than oppose it (8%), but half (49%) are not sure.⁵ When people hear more information, three quarters and higher tend to favor the Act depending on the question wording. Educating people about NCLB, therefore, can inadvertently lead to additional support for the narrow definition of the measure.

Other advocates have criticized NCLB for not providing the necessary funding to implement it. This approach is also an unwise use of advocates' limited resources. However, lack of funding for the Act's requirements may not be enough to shift opinion. A majority (58%, 28% strongly) continues to favor the Act when told that the federal government did not provide **full** funding to the states for the law's requirements. When the language is **adequate** funding, a majority continues to favor it (56% favor, 34% strongly).⁶ Furthermore, among a series of reasons to increase federal funding for education, the reason with the weakest support was an attack on NCLB for not providing funding to meet achievement standards.⁷

Instead of attacking the broad principles of NCLB or criticizing the government for not funding it adequately, advocates should put their energies into creating public support for the right implementation for education reform: using tests to target additional resources, determining how to attract qualified teachers to the district, etc.

To build public support for implementing a wider array of beneficial reforms, advocates need to eliminate the language of Market-based Accountability and develop the Nurturant Community perspective. Accountability language places blame on educators for not trying hard enough and causes people to support punitive measures against underperforming schools. Instead, communications needs to strengthen the Nurturant Community frame:

Set the context as the broader community, not an individual student and not an ethnic group. Communications needs to help citizens understand why they should be concerned about struggling districts. To do that, people need to see their connection to the broader community — the emphasis should be on us, not them. Similarly, racial disparities can quickly become an "us versus them" conversation, or cause people to slip into the Bad Society or Neglectful Parent mindset. Instead, disparities should be between districts, and emphasize causes and solutions.

The message is about opportunity for all children and a better future for us all. The public wants to provide opportunity for all children, particularly when the focus of their attention is on a broader community, not just their neighborhood

school.

Highlight solutions — we know how to educate and we know what needs to be done. Since people only hear about the problems, they don't believe there are any solutions. Therefore, specific solutions need to be a central component of this dialogue. Importantly, solutions cannot just be about funding. Instead, funding needs to be tied to specifics such as smaller classrooms, for example.

Diagnostic measures, not testing for accountability. Currently, NCLB positions tests as the cure — publish test scores and schools will be shamed into improving. Instead, measures should be used to diagnose where real problems exist and to provide additional support to cure the problems. Furthermore, advocates should seek to develop measures that will allow people to see real achievement and not simply rank districts against each other.

Remind people of what is working, so the best of education in America is not destroyed. People need to be reminded of what American schools do well — imagination and critical thinking. Drill and kill tests and rote memorization can destroy what is best about education in America.

Bring teachers into the discussion. Teachers are the most effective messengers when it comes to defining quality education.

Frames are long lasting; they cannot be created overnight. Years of criticism of public education have resulted in such negative public perceptions that support for the education system is being slowly eroded. If the Market-based Accountability frame used in communications to promote NCLB is allowed to take hold, people will begin to view education in their role as consumers rather than as citizens. It will take a long-term effort, carefully crafted, to rebuild public faith in, and commitment to, education.

About FrameWorks Institute: The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1999 to advance science-based communications research and practice. The Institute conducts original, multi-method research to identify the communications strategies that will advance public understanding of social problems and improve public support for remedial policies. The Institute's work also includes teaching the nonprofit sector how to apply these science-based communications strategies in their work for social change. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations, as well as toolkits and other products for the nonprofit sector at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

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Gallup Organization trend, the most recent 1,020 adults nationally, June 21-June 23, 2002. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

Sponsored by Phi Delta Kappa, conducted by the Gallup Organization, 1,000 adults nationally, conducted June 5-26, 2002. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

Sponsored by Phi Delta Kappa, conducted by the Gallup Organization, 1,108 adults nationally, conducted May 23-Jun. 6, 2001.

"A Measured Response: Americans Speak on Education Reform," sponsored by Educational Testing Service, conducted by Hart and Teeter Research Companies, 1054 adults nationally, April 25 - May 9, 2001. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

"Demanding Quality Education In Tough Economic Times," sponsored by Public Education Network and Education Week, conducted by Lake Snell Perry & Associates, 1050 registered voters nationally, including oversamples of 125 African Americans and 125 Latinos, January 22-January 28, 2003. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

"Demanding Quality Education In Tough Economic Times," sponsored by Public Education Network and Education Week, conducted by Lake Snell Perry & Associates, 1050 registered voters nationally, including oversamples of 125 African Americans and 125 Latinos, January 22-January 28, 2003. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

"Attitudes Toward the Public Schools Survey, 2002," sponsored by Phi Delta Kappa, conducted by the Gallup Organization, 1000 adults nationally, June 5 - 26, 2002. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.