



**Don't Give Up on Education!:**  
**A Cognitive Analysis of the Media Coverage of Education Reform**  
**2007-2008**

**A FrameWorks Research Report**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This report on the media coverage of education reform is the second media analysis in a larger study funded by the Nellie Mae Educational Foundation and the Lumina Foundation for Education. The overall objective of the study is to develop a communications strategy that advances a more constructive public conversation about education reform in the United States. The full scope of the study includes a wide array of qualitative and quantitative methods associated with Strategic Frame Analysis<sup>1</sup> (SFA). This report outlines one layer of analysis in the multi-layered, multi-method SFA approach to evidence-based communications research.

Media analyses are an important part of the SFA approach. Most importantly, they allow us to map a key dimension of what FrameWorks calls the “swamp of understanding” or, more simply put, to understand the wide range of opinions, arguments, cultural models and discourses that the public is regularly exposed to on any given issue. Since public media remains the primary source of information about public policy for average Americans, media analyses are an important empirical measurement of the frames that shape public thinking about an issue. Identifying the frames that are embedded in media messages is a prerequisite to the development of effective reframes because it provides a substantive understanding of the contexts in which the media tends to cover an issue as well as the broad patterns in the way information is presented. As such, by understanding the subtle patterns in the way the media presents issues, media content analyses help explain why people have stable and predictable patterns in how they interpret information. In this way, media analyses are the link between the information that swirls constantly around individuals and the internal patterns that people have developed, through repeated exposure to these patterns of information over time, to “think” and process information on an issue.

As a research method, media content analysis is a fairly broad analytical tool that can be used to evaluate the impact of media coverage in a variety of settings and on any number of issues. At FrameWorks, we tend to use two distinct types of media analyses: (1) descriptive media content analyses that outline the broad scope of media coverage accorded an issue during a particular period (focusing on the types and number of stories typically covered about an issue, variety in primary sources used to inform media reports, etc.); and (2) more inferential media content analyses (that we term “cognitive media analyses”) which delineate the dominant frames typically used in media coverage as well as how those frames shape, facilitate or otherwise constrain public thinking about potential solutions to social problems. As such, while the more descriptive media analyses underscore the agenda-setting aspects of the media coverage of an issue, the follow-up cognitive media analyses captures the broader social and cultural impacts of the frames used in this coverage.

On the issue of education reform, the first of the two media analyses in this study was conducted for FrameWorks by the Center for Media and Public Affairs at George Mason University. The report from that analysis documented, among other things, that education reform is typically covered as a local issue where the goal of improved student achievement is juxtaposed against the chronic resource constraints of local school systems. Findings from that analysis also include that students and parents are largely invisible in media coverage of school *systems*; more visible in this coverage are schools administrators, teachers and teachers' unions. Moreover, although the latter are portrayed with great regularity, they are seen mostly as adversaries to constructive reform efforts. The findings from the descriptive analyses also revealed that media coverage of education reform efforts tends to portray policymakers as having primary responsibility for leading education reform efforts, but the media also narrowly circumscribes the definition of "reform" by focusing on a handful of fairly modest reform proposals and objectives.<sup>2</sup>

In this report, we extend our analysis of media coverage of education reform by providing greater interpretive guidance about how the frames typically used in the news coverage of education reform are likely to be cognitively processed and interpreted by members of the public who receive these messages. As a result, this second "cognitive" media analysis captures a deeper understanding of how the media shapes public understanding of the issue of education reform. To do so, we "drill down" into the media coverage with a sharper analytical lens and use cognitive theory of how the mind works to make sense of information to evaluate the patterns of media presentation of this issue in the coverage.<sup>3</sup> Some of the key findings from this report are as follows:

- Despite the fact that the media coverage of education reform is fairly broad, none of the media we surveyed defined what was meant by *education reform*. As such, we find that this term has become an implicit part of the discourse around schools and education to the point that, although it was not explicitly defined, it is routinely discussed as a self-evident, culturally transparent conception. In short, media coverage assumes a culturally shared conception of education reform, which may not be culturally shared.
- Topics covered under the rubric of education reform were very broadly construed, ranging from ways discussions of school funding and bonds, school facility upgrades and changes in local school district administration, to considerations of how to name new schools, school uniforms and the like. The media presentation of education reform as so broadly construed makes it difficult for the public to understand the nature, size, scope and scale of education reform.
- There were many goals presented as the goals of education reform; five were particularly strong and recurrent themes in media coverage: (1) improving student achievement; (2) improving accountability in the education system; (3) improving the academic performance of poor and other "disadvantaged" kids; (4) transforming the aspects of the

educational system that take place outside the classroom; and (5) changing the behavior of teachers.

- Standardized test results were commonly used as uncontested evidence of either the “success” or “failings” of students, the racial/ethnic groups that they belong to, and/or the schools that they attend. In fact, standardized tests were presented as the proxy for student achievement and system accountability. The fact that standardized test results have become the measures by which a wide variety of funding and policy decisions are now based means that those tests garner significant media attention each time they are released. This continual presentation of test results serves as a constant drumbeat, reminding the public that student achievement and accountability (as subjects of education reform efforts) are *really* about test scores.
- The notion of institutional accountability now centers so firmly on standardized test scores that media reporting of *institutional innovation* is largely based on new ways of using the data from these tests to refashion school policies, procedures and pedagogy.
- Media outlets now heavily rely upon educational institutions (such as the communications offices of local school districts or state departments of education) as primary sources of news and the resulting news coverage tends to reflect the vantage point of those institutions, inherently reinforcing the legitimacy of that vantage point.
- There was a great deal of talk in the media coverage about education “gaps” and the need for reformers to use the resources at their disposal to close those gaps — especially as they related to the performance of poor, racial/ethnic minority, or urban students. This discourse can have a polarizing effect on the broader public who may fail to see themselves within reform efforts dedicated to improving the performance of “other people’s children.” Moreover, media coverage that ignores the broader improvements in the education system overall (not just for poor, minority or other disadvantaged children) does a disservice to the public in that it dramatically reduces the scope of relevant reforms to those that apply to “those children” and likely sacrifices the extent to which the larger public sees itself as responsible for and affected by reform efforts.
- The media coverage around education reform made it unequivocally clear that teachers and the unions that represent them are obstacles to reform and that any constructive reform efforts would need to “convince or compel teachers” to behave differently. Given the media’s construction of teachers as obstacles to effective learning, reform strategies that treat teachers as partners (rather than as combatants) may appear unconvincing as a legitimate means of addressing this issue. Moreover, the news coverage did very little “set up” or introduction of the idea that teachers were a problematic part of the educational system; this kind of coverage simply acknowledged this notion as a common cultural narrative.

- News accounts of education reform focused almost exclusively on the “downtown” debate (or the discussions from political power brokers about what reforms were likely to be emerging, etc.). These debates were rarely connected to the activities that take place *in* classrooms (except for standardized testing) and hardly reflected the challenges of daily life for students and their teachers in the classroom.
- Education reform proposals are most often presented as wish lists of disconnected policies or programs and often derided as grandiose rather than evaluated as pragmatic and thoughtful. That is, reform proposals tended to be characterized as ill-planned, “incomplete” or too shallow to address the enormity of the social problems at the root of the problems schools and educators now face.
- Education reformers with ambitious plans for educational institutions were derided as overly optimistic and utopian; their solutions were typically presented as lists — literally as “wish lists” — that were almost always surrounded by decidedly negative discussions about their feasibility, desirability or fate as political objects. The fact that the media coverage largely offered *lists* of policy options to the public without sufficient attention to a causal story about *why* such options are useful, *how* such options fit into or address broader social problems in the educational system, and *what* sorts of impacts we can expect them to have on education reform goals, is very problematic for enrolling public support.
- Education reform was overwhelmingly depicted in the media as a game of political football, rather than as a sincere and empirical search for public solutions to compelling social problems. Cynicism attached to government, in general, was applied to education as a result.
- The sharp partisan tone of the coverage of education reform (made even more pungent by a crowded field of presidential candidates jockeying for position) may have actually been successful in driving the public back to a wide variety of practiced cultural models that work to diminish support for many promising policy proposals.
- While education reforms are routinely evaluated in terms of their costs, the relationship between reform policies and their monetary costs are rarely framed in ways that put those costs in perspective for the public. The result is that the cost data presented to the public have the patterned effect of being “too large” to think and can activate a sense of government as in crisis and out of control.
- Although the overall thrust of the news accounts about education reform had a generally negative tone, there were two genres of stories that adopted a decidedly more positive tone: (1) “rags to riches” stories about the success of individual schools; and (2) stories about individual charismatic leaders who were leading successful reform efforts. Both types of stories tended to normalize the exceptions and failed to contextualize these

successes in the broader contexts and educational systems in which they occurred. Thus, the overall pattern of media coverage of these types of stories generally makes the “systems” within which our “heroes” function, largely invisible. Moreover, an articulate and explicit illumination of the determinants of “success” at the institutional and individual level is a valuable but often omitted component of the news coverage around education reform.

- Several metaphors describing aspects of education reform were identified in the media coverage and are likely to inform FrameWorks’ subsequent work on identifying and testing simplifying models.

This report begins by explaining the research methodology used to conduct the analysis, moves to present key findings, and then concludes by arguing that when the presentation of efforts to reform education are confined to the success stories of individual schools or are buried in a barrage of factors that make their success seem impossible (before positive possibilities have had time to be properly digested and considered), the public can lose sight of both the potential and feasibility of reform efforts, and the necessity of moving forward with strong policy responses. Without coverage that frames education reform as a series of feasible policies that involve all citizens, education reform will continue to be a problem for the “downtown” crowd rather than a mission connected to the “success” and “failure” of all schools and all students.

## INTRODUCTION

*Someone needs to protect our children from these reformers. I'm sure they mean well (as does Mort, the real estate guy who owns the newspaper) but they, like Mort, know nothing about education or what's really going on in schools. The best thing Joel Klein has done for New York City is make private school parents feel good about their decision to opt out of the public system. His alleged gains are nothing but smoke and mirrors.*

**NYC Teacher and Parent<sup>4</sup>**

**U.S. News & World Report Blog, February 2, 2009**

There is a strange wind swirling in the education policy world. Policy advocates on both sides of the political aisle have never been more unified in their belief that the American educational system is in need of deep, fundamental reform. While most Americans also believe this is true, somewhere along the way advocates seem to have lost the public's confidence that any reform efforts (irrespective of how broad or bipartisan they may be) can actually have a positive impact on the performance of American students. What's particularly peculiar about this development is that this kind of pessimism pervades the talk of both the general public and many of the primary stakeholders currently working in and around educational institutions (i.e., teachers, principals, school board members, etc.). As a result, despite the usual consensus that pervades the policy world today around the necessity and urgency for strong educational reforms (and its concomitant *esprit de corps*), most Americans seem to want no part of it.

Lost confidence on the part of the public is likely due to the confluence of a number of factors (some of which FrameWorks explored in our focus group report as part of this larger study<sup>5</sup>); one part of the equation is certainly the very visible and persistent hand of the media. While there is no concerted collusion among media elites to dampen the public's enthusiasm or appetite for reform, we show in this report that the presentation of issues related to education reform in the nation's media does in fact work to promote profound pessimism. This is accomplished through its representation of education reform as ill-fated, poorly planned, likely to fail against deeper structural forces at work, or as merely symbolic political maneuvers that have few legitimate prospects for surviving the political process and improving the educational outcomes of students. In essence, walking away from media coverage with any enthusiasm about the prospects of education reform would seem foolhardy — especially if one consumes a steady diet of news media about this issue.



## RESEARCH METHODS

FrameWorks reviewed a total of 492 articles collected from newspapers in various parts of the country. Articles from June 1, 2007, to June 1, 2008, were drawn from news sources in the following metropolitan areas: Detroit, Los Angeles, New York City, Washington, D.C, Boston, Atlanta, Chicago, Houston, Miami, Denver, San Francisco and Seattle. These areas were selected to provide a geographically diverse sample. Geographic diversity was a particularly important concern, given the finding (from the earlier descriptive media content analysis) that education reform discussions tend to be localized in nature. Our aim in selecting these locations was to have a sufficiently diverse sample to be able to make generalizable observations and statements about the patterns of news coverage and the interpretive effects of these patterns.

The majority of the news we surveyed came from the print media and, more specifically, from the major newspapers in each of the media markets listed above. This was mostly an artifact of education reform being covered almost exclusively by the print press and its relative absence from other forms of media.<sup>6</sup> Even so, we attempted to balance the influence of the print media by casting a wider net to obtain other media reports. In addition to local print and television news programs, we evaluated the nightly television news broadcasts from larger networks such as ABC, CBS, NBC and others (including cable networks like CNN and CNBC); news magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*; and public media sources (like “The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer” and National Public Radio). Finally, we also included media from many news outlets’ online sources such as CNN.com and NBC.com, although we generally excluded blogs and other user applications on these sites. While the intent to capture alternative media outlets did net some useful additions to the analysis, generally the reports from these alternative sources reflected much more episodic reports (e.g., coverage of working papers or reports released from key advocacy or government agencies related to education, key education administration appointments, etc.) and therefore proved less germane than stories that ran in the more traditional print media.

The news items examined for this analysis were identified by searching LexisNexis for the terms “education reform,” “school reform” and “education system.” These terms were chosen (over more general education terms) to capture the discourse on education in as transformative a sense as possible. That is, education is a very broad area discussed often in the media; by contrast, we wanted the analysis to reflect the instances where the lens of the media was focused specifically on the possibilities for change and transformation of the education system. We also knew from our prior research in this area that the public has a difficult time seeing “systems” rather than the parent-teacher-student triad.<sup>7</sup> As such, we saw it as our task in this analysis to specifically identify spaces within the existent media discourse where education “systems” were more visible as a subject matter. We specifically wanted to observe if and in what contexts a “systems”

discourse would emerge in media coverage on education reform and what sorts of cultural narratives would be applied to support that discourse.

More generally, articles were selected that most directly addressed education reform in a more substantive way. In the print media, substantial discussion about education reform took place on the editorial page or the local section of the paper. Articles about education reform that only listed the dissemination of a report from the Board of Education or the appointment of a school board official to a new post, for example, were excluded in favor of articles that focused more squarely on the task of presenting, acknowledging or debating potential school reforms. Because the analysis focused on the metaphors, explanatory frames and solutions suggested to address school reform, lengthier articles that provided more in-depth analysis were chosen over shorter pieces. Book reviews and obituaries were excluded from the analysis.

It is important to remember that this analysis is a qualitative examination of how topics related to education reform are treated in the media as well as the likely implications of these frame choices for public thinking and deliberation. The analysis looks at such factors as the types of topics that are and are not mentioned in a given article, the ways in which topics within a story are treated as either related or unrelated, the causal stories conveyed or implied by the articles, and so forth. In this sense, the analysis is less about cataloguing what is explicitly said than it is about identifying the implicit understandings conveyed within the coverage.

As is FrameWorks' custom in cognitive media analyses, much of the report is devoted to harmful patterns in the coverage of education reform — i.e., ways in which the coverage is likely to create counterproductive understandings in the minds of readers. However, although more limited, we also discuss elements of coverage that avoid these traps, since these positive examples can help guide advocates (and responsible journalists) to identify ways of providing more even and constructive framing around this issue.

## **FINDINGS**

### ***Media Coverage of the Goals of Education Reform***

To begin this analysis, we sought to get a working definition of “education reform” as it was reported in the news media. This is an important aspect of analyzing media coverage because the media often define the nature, size, scope and scale of social issues for the public.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly enough, in the course of our analysis we did not find a single article or media report that specifically defined what was meant by any of these terms in the context of the news reports in which they were offered. As such, we find that the term “education reform” has become an implicit part of the discourse around schools and education to the point that although it was not

explicitly defined, it was discussed as a self-evident, culturally transparent conception. In short, media coverage assumes a culturally shared conception of education reform, which may not be culturally shared.

The lack of any concrete and explicit definition in this coverage is no trivial matter. The media reports we found on this issue covered such a broad range of discrete topics that it was quickly evident how ambiguous and nebulous reform concepts are in the media. Education reform topics included in the media ran the gamut from broad discussions of “gutting,” “blowing up” or completely “reorganizing” the existing public education system to more basic activities like school funding concerns, facility renovations, school uniforms, rethinking the way that new schools are named, and adding programs targeted at parents to address a wide range of issues. If the public is dependent upon these articles for definitions of the nature, size, scope and scale of education reform efforts, there is little wonder that people are confused. The following is a sampling of the types of articles that purported to be describing the nature and scope of “education reform.”

If necessary, he [Supt. Brewer] said, “you **blow it up**. You blow it up. And you make sure you have something to put in its place. ... But the main thing is you got to have somebody on top of them to help them and give them the resources they need. You don’t just go in and throw stuff at people and expect them to be able to do it. If they could do it, they would have done it already.” (*L.A. Schools Chief Convenes Summit; Business Leaders, Union Members, Activists and Educators Target Low-Scoring Campuses*, Los Angeles Times, Metro Desk, Part B, September 20, 2007.)

Yet a package of Senate bills proposes to **gut** critical parts of the assessment and water down the new curriculum before it is even fully implemented. (*Stop Lawmakers From Gutting New Courses; Improving Student Knowledge Should Trump Short-Term Savings*, The Detroit News, Editorials, Pg. 10A, November 12, 2007.)

Rep. Peter Hoekstra ... believes the reauthorized version of NCLB will “**gut**” accountability. He is gloomily sanguine about that because he thinks accountability belongs at the local level anyway and because removing meaningful accountability removes NCLB’s *raison d’être*. He proposes giving states the option of submitting to Washington a “Declaration of Intent” to reclaim full responsibility for K-12 education. Such states would receive their portion of K-12 funds as block grants. (*Getting Past No Child*, The Denver Post, Editorial Page, B07, December 9, 2007.)

The other key part of the school’s **reorganization** is the creation of five special learning academies, no larger than 300 students each, headed by a team of teachers who will work together. One group will be entirely freshmen, and the other four will relate to curricula: environmental science; business; law and public safety; and arts and media. The

academies' goal is to foster closer ties between students and teachers, Diaz said. Tim Sippel, the improvement facilitator, said the academies will make the curriculum more engaging and potentially reduce the dropout rate. (*To Improve, Muir High Blazes a Trail; Pasadena 'School in Crises' Requires all Teachers to Reapply for Their Jobs as Part of Arduous Restructuring*, Los Angeles Times, Metro Desk, Part B, Pg. 1, March 31, 2008.)

Governor Patrick stood before state leaders and the press yesterday and joked as he began outlining his education **reorganization** plan: "I can see some of you trying your best not to roll your eyes," he said. (*Patrick's Education Overhaul*, The Boston Globe, Editorial, Pg. A14, January 11, 2008.)

RESIDENTS of the Sachem school district, who decisively voted down double-digit tax increases in 2004 and 2005, approved a \$33.1 million bond issue on Tuesday for **repairs, renovations and upgrades** in the district's 18 schools — but barely. The bond measure passed by a margin of 24 votes among the nearly 4,800 ballots cast. The vote was 2,411 to 2,387. (*Bond Issue is Approved for Sachem Schools*, The New York Times, Section LI, Pg. 2, March 16, 2008.)

In New Jersey, for example, 16 percent of public schools built before 1948 were named for presidents. The figure for schools built over the last two decades is 6 percent. In Arizona, the study said, a school opened in the last 20 years "was almost 50 times more likely to be named after such things as a mesa or a cactus than after a leader of the free world." Of course, one could say that some presidents richly earn the low regard in which they are held. But Professor Greene's larger point is that cities express communal values by **naming schools**, bridges or roads after people. When they settle on a name like Owl Creek, which was what Jefferson Elementary School in Fayetteville morphed into last year, they are essentially saying nothing. (*The Names We Choose or Ignore*, The New York Times, Section B, Pg. 1, July 6, 2007.)

Researchers plan to disseminate their findings at a forum this morning in hopes of influencing education reform around the state and **helping Latino parents in Boston choose better schools**, said Miren Uriarte, director of the Gaston institute. "The problem for Latino students in Boston is that most do not attend schools with the characteristics that lead to high achievement," the report said. "Many district schools are below state standards in almost every school quality indicator." (*When Teachers Become the Pupils: By Tackling Language and Cultural Barriers in Class, Educators and Latinos Hold Each Other Accountable*, The Boston Globe, Metro Section, Pg. B1, June 23, 2007.)

Thus we acknowledge that the media's presentation of "education reform" is incredibly wide-ranging, with no clearly delineated or defined concept of "education reform" available to the public. More than simply a matter of making it difficult for the public to arrive at a basic

understanding of reform, it is also likely to make it more difficult for the public to engage in or support both the general idea of reform as well as the specific reform proposals that purport to address important educational problems.

As a second but related topic, we were interested in evaluating the types of news coverage where these terms tended to emerge. We knew from our descriptive media content analysis<sup>9</sup> that there tended to be a fairly even split between episodic and thematic coverage in terms of overall presentation<sup>10</sup>, but we were also interested in examining in more detail the nature of the coverage within which those sources were cited. Generally, we found that education reform tended to emerge as part of local reporting of disputes among power leaders about school funding, new or controversial policy proposals, key education leadership appointments, and as part of regular coverage of newly released education data, statistics or progress reports.

In addition to the scope and level at which the media frames education reform, we also sought to examine more closely the cognitive effects of the patterns of the media's coverage of education reform. We therefore looked for the stated and more implicit purposes of education reform and whether these goals were discussed in positive or more pejorative terms. Here we found at least a dozen goals that were purported to be the drivers of education reform efforts. Five of those tended to be strong and recurrent themes as stated goals of reform: (1) improving student achievement; (2) improving accountability in the education system; (3) improving the academic performance of poor and other "disadvantaged" kids; (4) transforming the aspects of the educational system that take place outside the classroom; and (5) changing the behavior of teachers. We review each of these reform goals in greater depth, since they effectively function as the primary lenses through which education reform gets defined for the public (especially barring any explicit definitions in the coverage). In essence, we review the topics that tended to convey to the public what all this "education reform," "school reform" and "educational systems" talk is *really* about.

### **Education Reform is *Really* About Improving Student Achievement.**

Of all the goals of education reform, student achievement was the most salient in terms of the frequency within which it emerged in media coverage. In many ways, the focus on student achievement as a goal of education reform makes intuitive sense. That is, the myriad of proposals for changing the educational system have as their implicit and explicit goal, the improvement of students on educational tests.

Seeking to overhaul chronically failing campuses, Los Angeles schools Supt. David L. Brewer quietly convened education and community leaders Wednesday to help him devise a reform plan. In an e-mail to the board, Brewer said that low *academic achievement at those schools had "gone on long enough ... It's time for a change."* If the district didn't act, he added, "someone else will." (*L.A. Schools Chief Convenes Summit; Business Leaders, Union Members, Activists and Educators Target Low-Scoring Campuses*, The Denver Post, Metro Desk part B, Pg. 1, September 7, 2007.)

Reville stopped short of supporting merit pay for individual teachers based solely on their students' MCAS scores — long a subject of contention among educators and union officials — but provided the most detailed account to date of the administration's philosophy on teacher pay as a ***way to improve student achievement***. Faculty who work together to boost test scores, graduation rates, and attendance should be rewarded, he said. (*Patrick Aide Backs Teacher Pay Overhaul: Challenges System of Rewards in Mass*, The Boston Globe, Metro Section Pg. A1, May 7, 2008.)

Areas for action would include efforts to revamp special education, to improve the District's access to federal grants and to bring about more effective use of data to guide educational performance and policy. Citing problems including low academic performance levels in most schools and poor service delivery for special-needs students, the agency said it intended "***to ensure that dramatic improvements in student achievement occur.***" (*Rhee Seeks Authority to Terminate Employees; Planned Legislation is Aimed at Reorganizing the D.C. School System's Central Command*, The Washington Post, A Section A, p01, August 29, 2007.)

To date, the state response to underperforming schools has largely consisted of education department officials and outside consulting groups ***working with schools and districts on strategies to boost student achievement***. A school designated as underperforming, defined as showing inadequate progress for four straight years in moving students toward proficiency in math or English, must develop a school-improvement plan laying out steps it will take to address curriculum shortcomings, teacher training deficits, or other things that may be impeding student achievement. (*The Answer: Fifteen Years into Education Reform, We are Still Failing to Fix the Most Troubled Schools. Now There's No Excuse*, The Boston Globe, Ideas D1, June 1, 2008.)

FrameWorks' past research on education (including cultural models interviews and focus groups in earlier phases of this project<sup>11</sup>) suggests that the public has difficulty seeing the social or collective benefits of education — preferring to see the individual benefits to students and their families. The fact that the media overwhelmingly focus on improving student achievement (as achievement at the individual level) explains, at least in part, the way that the public understands the purposes of education.

While the clear majority of coverage focused on student achievement as it related to the career prospects of individual students, there was a smaller group of news articles that tried to make the larger social benefits of education more visible. For example,

**“Student achievement is owned by everyone,”** said Kristen St. George, the school’s principal. “It’s not just a math issue or a special education issue.” ... The predicament mirrors that of the state, according to educational advocacy groups. The difficulty of math ramps up quickly in middle school, they say, where students learn algebraic concepts that years ago many students didn’t tackle until high school — a sign of how education reform is trying to better prepare students for math and science careers. (*A Better Equation — A Braintree Middle School, Spurred by Federal Mandate, Redesigns its Math Curriculum, and the Gains are Adding Up*, The Boston Globe, Metro Section Pg. B1, November 18, 2007.)

But I believe the problems facing our current education system — dropout rates, proficiency levels, remedial courses, violence in classrooms — will affect every person in this country. Any education reform that is not comprehensive ... will ultimately fail. (*Art for Education’s Sake*, The Denver Post, Perspective E03, Pg. B1, September 30, 2007.)

While other states and nations are rapidly **implementing innovative education reforms to compete for knowledge economy jobs**, Michigan lawmakers are considering major cuts that will undermine two of the most essential economic boosters: the new high school curriculum and state assessment. The curriculum and assessment work hand in hand. The tougher courses will improve the preparedness of high school graduates, and state testing holds schools accountable for properly teaching the courses ... Global competition sets the competitive standard. Michigan students will have to compete with students from other places where writing skills are stressed. (*Stop Lawmakers From Gutting New Courses; Improving Student Knowledge Should Trump Short-Term Savings*, The Detroit News, Editorials, Pg. 10A, November 12, 2007.)

Finally, the media coverage of education reform spoke to the issue of student achievement as being synonymous with standardized testing. In fact, our initial descriptive media analysis found that more than half of all the data and statistics used in media coverage were dedicated to the presentation of standardized test results.<sup>12</sup> Missing from this coverage of student achievement was any discussion about more systemic determinants of student achievement like the age and condition of school resources (such as up-to-date textbooks, science labs, technological facilities), teacher preparation in subjects taught, affluence or poverty of the supporting communities, and other related determinants of student performance. Thus, although the goal of improved student achievement is a reasonable one for education reformers, the way in which it is discussed in the media (as a test score) is particularly narrow and considerably limits the scope of public thinking about the ways to judge the performance of schools, students and by extension, the educational system. We take this issue up in more depth in the subsequent discussion of accountability.

### **Education Reform is *Really* About Standardized Testing and Accountability.**

As a second but related education reform goal, the need to develop and maintain key measures of accountability for the system, as well as to make educational outcomes more transparent to policymakers, was well represented in the media coverage. These are also reasonable and intuitive goals for reform, as policymakers need to have such accountability measures in place to assess their success or failure in promoting student achievement. Analysis of media coverage reveals an important distinction in the assignment of accountability between individuals and systems. While teachers and parents were represented as responsible for the achievement of individual students in the news, the educational *system* was held accountable for the achievement of larger bodies of students as primarily measured by test scores.

Most of the incoming high school senior classes this fall in towns south of Boston have passed the MCAS, a requirement for graduation, at a higher rate than their peers statewide. ***“To me, there is no greater sign of progress than to see more and more students passing these exams every year,”*** David P. Driscoll, the commissioner of the state Department of Education, stated in a release. (*Formula for Success: Most Local Schools Top State Average in MCAS Pass Rates — Officials Credit Remediation Efforts, but Marvel at Their Effectiveness, Given Lack of Funding*, Boston Globe, South, Pg. Reg1, July 19, 2007.)

Our review of the media around education reform suggests that system accountability now largely rests on standardized tests. Although there is some acrimony among experts (an issue we briefly raised in the last section), news reports tended to present the results of these tests rather uncritically, which further entrenches the perception that standardized testing equates to accountability. Without articles that critically evaluate the validity of testing (as the rare news reports below attempted to do) the public is exposed to report after report that presents and implicitly assumes that test results *are* the evidence of either the “success” or “failings” of students, the racial/ethnic groups that they belong to, and the schools that they attend.

The rationale for standards-based reform was that expectations would become more rigorous and uniform, but states’ proficiency tests vary “wildly” in difficulty, “with ‘passing scores’ ranging from the 6th percentile to the 77th.” ***Indeed, “half of the reported improvement in reading, and 70 percent of the reported improvement in mathematics, appear idiosyncratic to the state test.” In some states, tests have become more demanding; but in twice as many states, the tests in at least two grades have become easier.*** NCLB encourages schools to concentrate their efforts on the relatively small number of students near the state test’s proficiency minimum — the students who can most help the state meet its “adequate yearly progress” requirements. (*Getting Past No Child*, The Denver Post, Editorial Page, B07, December 9, 2007.)



Students are showing improvement on many state exams. But state education officials nationwide — including Illinois — have *watered down local tests so much that it's difficult to determine real progress*. (*Bush Touts School Reform Law; But Critics Cast Doubt on Renewal of No Child Left Behind*, Chicago Tribune, News Section Zone 3, January 8, 2008.).

The fact that these data are presented so uncritically is most likely related to two other trends: (1) the extent to which the media “parrots” or uses government institutions as a primary source of information in their reporting (sometimes taking whole passages from press releases that come from the communication officers of school districts); and (2) the extent to which public policy not only defines how system outcomes are measured but also how those forms of measurement become hegemonic in the presentation of the issue in the media. We evaluate these two trends in more depth below.

### **Chasing Down the “Ole Pitch and Place”**

It is no secret that journalists (especially print media journalists) have few independent resources to use in investigative reporting. As a result, journalists tend to rely primarily on “official” sources of news like press releases, reports and public events to cover issues. This is especially true at the local media level. Even a cursory glance at the media coverage on education reform makes it clear how dependent local news outlets are on press releases and other “official” sources of news that emerge at the school district level. This explains why school administrators were most consistently cited as sources of information in that coverage.<sup>13</sup> As a result of these sources of information, most of the “press release” variety of stories were written about key leadership appointments, organizational reshuffling, announcements of new or controversial policy proposals, standardized test results, or other forms of progress reports.

The primary problem with having so much of the coverage of education reform come directly from press releases from educational institutions is that the resulting coverage tends to reflect and accept as given the vantage point of those institutions. In the case of student achievement and accountability, school districts are now bound to specific ways of evaluating student and school success (via standardized tests, for example) and the resulting media coverage tends to inherently reinforce the legitimacy of those measures.

### **There's a New Sheriff in Town (or Changing the Frame by Changing the Terms of the Debate)**

It is also important to recognize that changes in policy can impact the presentation and patterns of coverage in other ways. As we discuss in this section, the implementation of standardized testing as an institutional requirement dramatically altered the terms of the policy debate such that the conversation came to revolve around educational accountability, student achievement,

and testing as measurement. As a consequence, the direction and pattern of media coverage necessarily changed in ways that narrowed public thinking about education reform efforts.

The arguments put forth by Sanford Schram and Joe Soss (2001) on the welfare reform policies passed in the 1990s can be instructive in underscoring the phenomena we refer to here. They argue that one of the most important effects of welfare reform was not just that it introduced tougher and more stringent requirements for assistance to poor families, but rather that it introduced a new set of measures for evaluating institutional “success” and “failure”.<sup>14</sup> They locate the source of those new forms of evaluation not as the product of objective deliberations about how to best measure the performance of social welfare institutions but rather as part of a larger discursive struggle over the goals of those institutions and the policies they embody. Those evaluation measures, they argue, also altered how welfare institutions were judged, assessed and portrayed in the media.

Media stories on welfare reform have tended to be framed in terms that establish and dramatize the success of new TANF policies. By this claim, we do not mean that journalists have disseminated incorrect facts, exhibited overt bias, or colluded with those who have a stake in welfare reform’s success. Rather, our argument is that media coverage has been shaped by policy makers’ concerns with the problem of dependency and, hence, has focused on a set of facts and interpretations that support a verdict of policy success. The roots of this focus, we argue, lie in an anti-welfare discourse that not only produced policy retrenchment in the 1990s but also defined the terms on which this retrenchment would be judged ... [T]he current framing of welfare evaluation in terms of caseload levels and leaver outcomes is far from natural or neutral. ... The “inevitable moment” ... was not inevitable; it was and is an outcome of political battles fought on the contested terrain of public discourse.<sup>15</sup>

As such, we highlight here that the media often reifies the implicit assumptions made within public policies about the scope, value and importance of various parts of the educational system. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, in this way, seems to have had this kind of impact on education.<sup>16,17</sup> The terms of much of the debate among education experts now revolves around the results of standardized tests, “underperforming” or “failing” schools, and accountability systems. In the absence of other methods of evaluating student outcomes and forcing local school districts to report this measure (standardized tests), the legislation essentially determines school performance and elevates this method as the only one that counts. The lesson suggested here by Schram and Soss might be well applied to the ways in which education reform efforts are judged:

Our purpose here is not to suggest that caseload decline should be interpreted solely as bad news. Rather, it is to recover the lost frames of reference that could and should make observers uncertain about what roll decline really means.<sup>18</sup>

In a similar fashion, the media reports that so implicitly frame education reform as “success” or “failure” based on standardized testing do little to help the public understand what those tests actually mean. While there is uneasiness even among the staunchest supporters of standardized testing, rarely are any other means presented in media coverage that the public could use to more fully evaluate the performance of the education “system.” We know from cultural models theory that in the absence of an alternative way to judge performance, the public will likely default to their own anecdotal experiences with children’s educational outcomes or will access the existing cultural models that they have the most practice using — in this case that educational success = high test scores. From other parts of our education work we know that the cultural models people tend to use in thinking about education and reform typically lead in directions that are especially unproductive to more systems-level, progressive thinking about reform efforts.<sup>19</sup>

Standardized tests results have become the measures by which a wide variety of funding and policy decisions are now based and, because of their connections to funding decisions, garner media attention every time they are released. This reinforces the continual presentation of test results in the media and serves as a constant drumbeat, reminding the public that student achievement and accountability (as subjects of education reform efforts) are *really* about test scores.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, the notion of institutional accountability now centers so firmly on standardized test scores that *institutional innovation* (as reported by the media) has been largely based on new ways of using the data from these tests to refashion school policies, procedures and pedagogy.

In keeping with the school’s new focus, ***he said, he has adjusted his science lessons to emphasize the basic reading and math skills being measured on the standardized tests.*** For instance, he said, students will write essays analyzing the technology shown on old “Star Trek” episodes. They will read aloud more in class, do more calculations in the lab, and summarize scientific research from the Internet. (*For a School, Hope and a Fresh Start*, The New York Times, Section 14LI, Pg. 1, September 16, 2007.)

In coming up with a plan to turn around Newton, Seton Hall’s professors spent nearly a year observing classes, interviewing teachers and analyzing testing data. They studied classroom strategies that had worked in other schools, and adapted them for Newton. Last month, Seton Hall and the teachers union sponsored five days of training for Newton teachers that included ***workshops on how to manage their classrooms and change their instruction to focus on weaknesses revealed by the test data.*** (*For a School, Hope and a Fresh Start*, The New York Times, Section 14LI, Pg. 1, September 16, 2007.)

While test scores at the 675-student school are high, ***Abeyta said she and her staff regularly scrutinize the data to look for weaknesses, increase accountability, and***

**improve teaching.** She shares the previous year’s MCAS data for each grade at the start of each school year at a schoolwide teachers meeting. “At first it was kind of scary, posting these scores in a PowerPoint presentation,” Abeyta said. “It was uncomfortable — open accountability for everyone to see. You can’t hide because the data doesn’t lie.” Two years ago, ***the analysis and lower-than-desired third-grade reading scores prompted the school to revamp its literacy program for kindergarten through second grade.*** Abeyta, a former kindergarten and first-grade teacher, also threw out the district’s language benchmarks for young students learning English, and instead pushed those students to reach the same standards expected of native English speakers. (*When Teachers Become the Pupils: By Tackling Language and Cultural Barriers in Class, Educators and Latinos Hold Each Other Accountable*, The Boston Globe, Metro Section Pg. B1, June 23, 2007.)

Moreover, innovations that did not emerge from the test data were typically viewed with suspicion and derision in media coverage. For example, this Boston Globe editorial ridiculed the state’s plan for education reform because it had not sufficiently included a formal mechanism to use test data more readily.

***It would be a major disappointment if the Patrick administration fails to include data-driven instruction in its 10-year “readiness” plan for education due out later this month.*** Right now, the administration appears focused largely on longer school days and new governance models as ways to improve underperforming schools. These are valuable reforms. But data-driven instruction in some cases could prove as effective and less expensive. And if the early Kennedy School results can be replicated, it holds enormous potential for moving special ed students into mainstream classrooms. (*Reading by the Numbers*, Boston Globe, Editorial, A10, June 16, 2008.)

The primary lament of education advocates who oppose the use of testing as the sole, or primary source of institutional accountability has been the extent to which these tests would change (or have already changed) the scope of teaching in ways that impairs broader learning. That is, advocates have been concerned that teachers would begin to “teach to the tests” rather than cultivate learning more broadly in their classrooms. While the media did not tend to cover the contours of the disputes around the value of these tests, they did routinely incorporate viewpoints that highlighted how the focus on test scores had narrowed the overall scope of what is taught in schools.

***The accountability piece is key. The old adage, “What is assessed, gets taught” is true.*** (*Stop Lawmakers From Gutting New Courses; Improving Student Knowledge Should Trump Short-Term Savings*, The Detroit News, Editorials, Pg. 10A, November 12, 2007.)

***Some schools have narrowed curriculum to focus on math and reading, but critics suggest that may backfire, giving kids less background in the complex topics they see in***

**middle-school science and history classes.** By eighth grade, they've missed years of content, says Mike Petrilli of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, a Washington think tank. (*Youngsters Raise Math, Reading Scores; But Schools Have Far to Go, Data Show*, USA Today, Life Section 5D, September 26, 2007.)

**Any education reform that is not comprehensive and does not integrate the arts will ultimately fail.** Real limitations on time, money and resources force decision-makers to make tough choices and ultimately cut the school day up like a pie. This divide-and-conquer approach to education causes even primary disciplines to engage in a boxing match. **Tough choices. I get it. Why would anyone in their right mind pick theater over literacy? The logical solution to a child who can't read is to spend more time on reading and cut out other activities.** But why can't this child read at grade level? Could it be because he isn't interested in school? Maybe acting in a play or writing a song for a music class will engage this student in the written word. Why is this child failing in science? Could it be that she is a tactile learner and would benefit from using dance to study centripetal force? (*Art for Education's Sake*, Denver Post, Perspectives Section E-03, September 30, 2007.)

Moreover, arguments in the media about the impact of test scores, how students are prepared for such tests by teachers, and what is taught in classrooms reinvigorated discussion about the importance of teaching “the basics.”

“We have to go **back to basics**,” Schiller said, “and look at what’s being taught, when it’s taught, how and why it’s taught, and who is teaching it.” (*L.A. Schools Chief Convenes Summit; Business Leaders, Union Members, Activists and Educators Target Low-Scoring Campuses*, Los Angeles Times, Metro Desk, Part B, September 20, 2007.)

The results that year, which were down dramatically from previous years, caused Wittenhagen’s jaw to drop about a foot, she said. The school expected an increase because it started a new math program. The school quickly made changes, realizing some concepts in the new program were not being taught soon enough for MCAS testing standards. ... In some cases, they also devoted more minutes of the school day to the **basics of reading and math.** (*MCAS Test Scores are Best in 3 Years: Grades 3 Through 8 Reverse Recent Decline*, Boston Globe, Northwest, Reg 1, October 7, 2007.)

**But today, our current patchwork of state and local standards fails to provide any meaningful assurances that kids are learning even the basics.** (*25 Years After “Nation at Risk,” Education Still Inadequate*, The Denver Post, Northwest, Pg. A-30, April 26, 2008.)

We also note that the television news media (whether of the prime network or cable variety) seemed to do a much better job of integrating various perspectives on this issue.

JOHN MERROW: Under No Child Left Behind, schools are evaluated by test scores, which are broken down by subgroups such as race, family income, and disability. If even one subgroup fails, the entire school is labeled as having failed to make adequate yearly

progress. At Bailey's, teachers in the testing grades — three, four and five — are feeling the pressure.

LYNN RIGGS: Everybody has succumbed to drilling to learn how to take a multiple choice test, so that we've all modified our teaching, Fairfax County included, Bailey's Elementary included.

JOHN MERROW: Secretary Spellings says that should not be a problem.

MARGARET SPELLINGS: If you have a curriculum that is sound and strong and is what you want your kids to know and you're measuring against that, there's not a thing wrong with teaching to the test.

JOHN MERROW: Fairfax County teacher of the year said, "Our country needs people who can solve problems, be analytical. All that's lost in the high-stakes tests and narrowing curriculum."

MARGARET SPELLINGS: Well, I mean, I guess what my question is, is that person advocating that we go back to not finding out how poorly or how well our students are being served, that we eliminate measurement of kids?

JOHN MERROW: But Bailey's teachers don't believe that one test is an accurate measure of student progress.

BETSY WALTER: As a teacher, I'm continually assessing my students. And I believe that they're much more authentic assessments than a standardized test. I don't come in every day and baby sit. I am a teacher. We have significant learning that goes on every day. It just might not be shown on that test that someone developed at the testing place. (*The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, August 16, 2007.)

In sum, the discussion of student achievement as a goal of education reform did not reflect the broader concerns about the validity of the method (standardized testing) that has become the deeply and implicitly shared stand-in for student achievement. The important take-away message for the public inherent in how the media covers education reform is *that test results are the exclusive measurement of student success and accountability — and the results of these tests are thereby synonymous with the chief goal of education reform efforts*. Thus, the social construction of "student achievement" as "test score" narrows the scope of public thinking about education reform. This is especially true when an explicit definition of what is meant by terms like "education reform" is absent.

Finally, the media discussion of accountability as a goal of education reform can easily devolve into a political football that fits squarely within the established territory of politicians, power players and policymakers. Quite simply, the latter were the actors to whom responsibility for solving the problems with education were generally attributed. They were often the sole sources cited or mentioned in the news reports, so much so, that most news reports made only passing,

abstract references to other actors in the educational system. In particular, in these reports “students” or “children” were commonly talked *about* but seldom talked *to*.

As Detroit Public Schools rapidly loses students, state policymakers are tempted to let the district off the accountability hook and allow it to keep its first-class district status without asking anything in return. That would be a terrible disservice to the city’s children. Instead, state legislators must seize this opportunity to leverage reform in the district in return for the special funding advantages that come with being the state’s only first-class district. To do otherwise would enable the district to maintain its failing status quo. We don’t quibble with the reality that Detroit, serving a large, urban student population, needs special funding consideration. But the money shouldn’t come without strings attached. (*Trade Education Reform for Detroit’s Extra Funds*, The Detroit News, Editorials, 5C, June 22, 2008.)

This finding is consistent with those that emerged in the descriptive media content analysis. That study found that discussions of the “consequences were overwhelmingly focused on individual students”<sup>21</sup>, but attribution of responsibility in terms of who was seen as responsible for rethinking schools, was clearly located at the policymaker level.

On the one hand, this could be seen as a beneficial conception because it has the potential to get the public out of the individualizing cultural models that propel them to see student outcomes as a result of the individual actions of parents, teachers and students. In this way, the media coverage could be useful in highlighting the role that policy (and other structural forces) plays in shaping student outcomes. Unfortunately, this kind of construction also has potentially negative consequences — the most damaging being that seeing policymakers as the source of change removes agency from the public as engaged actors in advancing, shaping, facilitating and helping to direct education reform efforts. As such, the presentation of education reform as focused on revising policy at the institutional level (where parents seldom have formal power) leaves very little space for the public to imagine how they might participate in, or add-value to, education reform efforts.<sup>22</sup>

### **Education Reform is *Really* About Poor and Other Disadvantaged Kids.**

A third explicit goal of education reform in the media has to do with *to whom* the reforms are targeted. There was a great deal of coverage dealing with education “gaps” and the need for reformers to use the resources at their disposal to close those gaps — especially as they related to the performance of poor, racial/ethnic minorities, or urban students on standardized tests.

Latinos make up more than a third of the city schools, and are expected to soon surpass black students in number. They are also facing the greatest challenges: More than a quarter quit school, many as early as sixth grade, and only half graduate from high school in four years. In 2007, nearly a fifth of Latino eighth-graders in the Boston public schools

failed the English MCAS, and nearly half failed math, according to the most recent MCAS results. Forty-eight percent scored proficient in English, and 20 percent in math. . . Students who struggle are also monitored closely. Teachers tutor recent immigrants and other students, starting in second grade, who have fallen behind in math and English. Middle-school students who have trouble with math get help from McKay graduates who now attend East Boston High. (*When Teachers Become the Pupils: By Tackling Language and Cultural Barriers in Class, Educators and Latinos Hold Each Other Accountable*, The Boston Globe, Metro Section Pg. B1, June 23, 2007.)

The system needs a dramatic overhaul. What’s happening now, clearly, isn’t working. Consider this: Only 19 percent of Hispanic boys enrolled in Denver middle schools in 2001 graduated from high school, according to one recent analysis. Only 69 out of 336 10th-graders at North High School were proficient in reading, life’s most important skill. That’s just a small slice of what’s happening, but the numbers are staggering, especially when you consider that Hispanics are the fastest-growing population in Colorado. (*Changing the Future*, The Denver Post, Perspective Pg. E-04, July 8, 2007.)

While the superintendent’s thrust also seeks outside advice from the task-force members, he made clear he is ultimately accountable for whether the high-stakes salvage is successful. “My job is to basically transform all of my low-performing schools,” Brewer said. “To the extent I have partners, that is great, but the scope of this issue is beyond partnership. I’ve got to fix all of them.” (*L.A. Schools Chief Convenes Summit; Business Leaders, Union Members, Activists and Educators Target Low-Scoring Campuses*, The Denver Post, Metro Desk part B, Pg. 1, September 7, 2007.)

It is worth stating that the reporting on and discussion about the performance of poor and “disadvantaged” children is a function of two issues: (1) the NCLB requirement that school districts report the achievement data across race, gender and class categories; and (2) the historical legacy of education as a civil rights issue such that school systems now routinely collect and report statistics for these sub-groups. These two factors combine to explain the greater media attention to disparities in test results across different student groups.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress shows a slight narrowing of the racial achievement gap over the past three years. This narrowing, however, is due to a decline in overall reading scores, not to improvements in minority student performance. This is not progress. Review the figures, and you will see that our schools are not failing NCLB; the program is failing our schools. In some grades, reading and math scores have actually declined for Hispanics, African-Americans and others. The current pass-fail rating system is worse than meaningless — it’s counter-productive. If a school needs help, we should help that school. We shouldn’t punish it, as NCLB mandates. (*NCLB Fails Our Schools*, USA Today, News, 10A, September 7, 2007.)



From a framing standpoint, the uneven attention on the performance of poor and disadvantaged children on standardized tests represents a “fairness between groups” frame. Our research across a broad spectrum of topics suggests that this frame has a polarizing effect on the public who fail to see themselves within reform efforts dedicated to improving the performance of “other” children.<sup>23</sup> That is, reform for “those children” is not seen to concern middle class and/or white parents, and resources thrown at “those children” are perceived to equate to fewer resources for “my” child. If a good portion of the general public cannot see the value of public action for themselves and in the larger benefits to society, they may be reluctant to engage in and support reform efforts. A reporter from the Boston Globe summed it up best when he assessed the Boston Superintendent’s chances of succeeding in reform of the education system as being akin to enticing taxpayers to support reforms that benefit “other people’s children.”

The reorganization plan, including the new Cabinet-level secretariat, is only useful to the extent that it helps Patrick achieve his ambitious goals for the next chapter of education reform. And that requires a difficult political trick: *making the taxpayers care about other people’s children.* (*Patrick’s Education Overhaul*, The Boston Globe, Editorial, Pg. A14, January 11, 2008.)

In lieu of the “fairness between groups” frame, FrameWorks often suggests that advocacy groups employ a “fairness between places” frame (a frame that emphasizes the social or physical location of groups who could especially benefit from greater educational resources and support). If this frame were more readily used within media reports about education reform efforts, our previous work on this issue suggests that the public would be more eager to participate in the discussion of fairness and in targeting scarce resources to the most acute needs. Moreover, doing the latter might help counteract the media impact of polarizing the debate around educational resources.

In “fairness” to the media coverage of education reform, there were a few news reports that found ways to use a bit of the “fairness between places” frame.

Education reform in Massachusetts was launched in large part to address the achievement gap between urban and suburban students and the dropout problem that disproportionately afflicts urban schools. Yet *a significant gap continues to exist and the dropout rate has increased dramatically in urban school districts.* With the recent addition of three new members to the Board of Education, as well as the attention and concern of the governor, there is reason to hope that the rigorous examination of the policies needed to reverse these trends will finally take place. (*The Education Gap*, Boston Globe, Editorial Page, Pg A15, April 9, 2008.)

Rural school districts across Colorado are struggling to find the money to keep their buildings up to fire code, replace broken-down buses and buy new boilers — let alone

build up-to-date classrooms and libraries. ***Now, a group of state lawmakers is working to close the gap between the richest and poorest districts.*** The state kicks in extra money to smaller districts for classroom and operating costs. But when it comes to dollars for major building projects, local taxpayers are, for the most part, on their own. And that means vast disparity in the condition of school buildings across Colorado ... “I set out on the trip thinking we could build a bridge to the 21st century, and we got stuck somewhere in the late 19th,” Romanoff said. “The quality of your education depends to a large extent on your ZIP code, and the kids in the poorest parts of the state know it.” (*Rural Schools in Need*, The Denver Post, A Section Pg. A-01, September 3, 2007.)

In general, this theme of fairness was so strong and recurrent around education reform that, even in cases when the sources cited by the media did not mention it, journalists would raise it on their own. On editorial pages especially, it was not unusual to see newspaper editors actually admonish or advise policymakers to narrow the scope of reforms and use initiatives targeted to the neediest rather than employ more universal options.

Governor Patrick should focus on one or two affordable initiatives that are likely to raise the student achievement of low-income students. Introducing proven early literacy programs in selected schools and hiring human service coordinators to counteract chaotic home lives are good places to start. (*Cheaper Than Ignorance*, Boston Globe, Editorial Page, Pg. D8, June 29, 2008.)

The above quote raises a separate issue — from a cognitive perspective, coverage that centers around groups makes it easy for the public to retreat to familiar but harmful cultural models that attribute responsibility for problems to individual families. The fact that, as this quote suggests, education reformers would need to “counteract chaotic home lives” of underperforming students implicitly implicates parents and their children for low academic test scores. While it is true that poverty (and the social ills that follow) can engender more complication in family life and that parents have a major responsibility in promoting the academic achievement of their children, this conversation must be carefully framed to avoid activating what FrameWorks terms “the family bubble” (or the implicit and shared assumption that parents and their children are solely responsible for the academic outcomes of their children). Education reform framed in terms of the family bubble may lead the public to see reform as rewarding undeserving families and reformers as taking on responsibilities that rightfully belong to parents. Most harmfully, this frame may cause the public to see education reform as an individual issue, which detracts from the ability to realize the need to improve system-wide outcomes for *all* children. In any case, legislation that requires school districts to report out sub-group statistics invites media coverage that is heavily focused on these statistics and the disparities they capture. When this coverage then presents these raw data without interpretation, the media inadvertently invites a cognitive understanding of these data that is likely to shut down people’s sense of responsibility and inhibit more progressive thinking on this issue.

If this “disparities” frame were attached to more systemic, rather than individual, trends, it might be more effective in creating support for public policies. A good example of how this might be done appeared in a Boston Globe article that tried to tie the emphasis on poor and disadvantaged children to the broader social outcomes of education reform that concern *all* students — regardless of racial or ethnic background.

The Patrick administration unveils its plans today for a major redesign of the state’s public education system. The boldest efforts will focus on ways to boost achievement of low-income students who struggle despite the state’s superior national ranking on many standards-based tests. ***But the overarching goal of Governor Patrick’s Readiness Plan is the right one: to create an effective education system capable of sustaining middle-class aspirations in the 21st century.*** (*Education Reform 2.0*, Boston Globe, Editorial, A14, June 23, 2008.)

Finally, the preoccupation in standardized test score disparities across groups underscores an issue that is not directly addressed in the media coverage. Discussion about the low performance of poor and disadvantaged children belies the broader need to improve the performance and learning of *all* children. That is, the discourse around this narrow band of students obscures the potential to address a much larger set of curricula and pedagogical challenges that apply to and affect all children. In this way, media coverage that ignores the broader improvements in the education system overall (not just for poor, minority or other disadvantaged children) does a disservice to the public in that it dramatically reduces the scope of relevant reforms to those that apply to “those children” and likely sacrifices the extent to which the larger public sees itself as responsible for and affected by reform efforts.

### **Education Reform is *Really* About Changing the Behavior of Teachers.**

A fourth and more implicit goal of the education reform identified in media coverage concerned the behavior of teachers. The media coverage around education reform made it unequivocally clear that teachers were an obstacle to reform and that any constructive reform efforts would need to “convince or compel teachers” to behave differently. Most media reports never explicitly said teachers were a problematic aspect of education reform efforts but the tone in describing the role of teachers in reform made a clear, but implicit statement that teachers were a barrier to reform efforts.

“It’s absolutely essential that schools have the ability to recruit, retain, and reward high-performing staff in the way they see fit, and staff that is not high-performing — they have to have the ability to let them go as well,” says Dave Levin, a cofounder of the KIPP schools. “You don’t see any other industry where if you don’t have control over your staff you have a successful organization.” (*The Answer: Fifteen Years into Education*

*Reform*, Boston Globe, Ideas Section, D1, June 1, 2008.)

There was substantial scrutiny of teachers and their role in advancing educational objectives. Most of this coverage on this specific issue was related either to compensation or teacher preparation.

Teacher quality has more impact on student performance than any other factor, according to a variety of research, which is why the way we prepare teachers is fundamental to education reform ... Instead of unproductive debates over alleged bias in teacher testing, we should focus on increasing academic expectations across the entire educational system. ***It would be a gross disservice for our public school children to be taught by teachers who do not meet the standards set by our current teacher tests.*** (*High Standards for Teachers*, Boston Globe, Op-ED, A11, October 6, 2007.)

And often, teachers were painted with broad negative brush strokes because of their affiliation with strong unions — unions that were viewed as powerful obstructions to fundamental reform.

The general acceptance of data-driven instruction programs by teachers is also significant. ***A clash could be brewing between teachers unions and Governor Patrick over the administration's proposal for so-called in-district Readiness Schools, where the influence of unions on curriculum and staffing would be limited.*** (*Reading by the Numbers*, Boston Globe, Editorial, A10, June 16, 2008.)

We should also mention that in the Fall of 2007 a federal lawsuit questioned teacher credentialing, preparations, and the impact on high-poverty communities. The lawsuit alleged that communities with high concentrations of poverty were more likely to have teachers who were unqualified (or barely qualified) to teach and that this constituted a civil rights issue for children in these communities. As might be expected, this lawsuit garnered significant additional coverage to the existing media focus on how teachers are selected, trained and credentialed.

A federal lawsuit and a new report challenge the Bush administration's rules on teacher credentials, saying they fail to ensure that students have a highly qualified teacher. But the lawsuit and the report offer diverging recommendations for fixing the problem. (*Lawsuit Questions Teacher Qualifications*, Miami Times, Pg. 10A, Vol. 84 No. 52, August 29, 2007.)

With the exception of the occasional editorial in defense of teachers (typically by teachers or other administrators), media coverage of education reform contained very few praises of teachers nor any substantive exploration or explanation of the professional challenges they face in the classroom. In fact, the only positive images of teachers in media coverage occurred (1) in discussions of the financial sacrifices they make, either because of their acceptance of low wages or because their use of personal financial resources to provide teaching supplies to their students

and (2) when teachers were allowed to speak for themselves.

Mr. Whitaker, 45, gives out spiral notebooks and pencils at the start of the school year because, he said, welfare and child support checks are usually cashed for food at the beginning of the month. Mr. Whitaker, who was raised by a widowed mother in Rochester, said he did not want students to fall behind waiting for money to buy notebooks. Since arriving at Newton last year, Mr. Whitaker has spent more than \$2,000 of his own money to buy supplies for his students, including \$800 for five additional microscopes. He introduced \$1 quizzes in his classes (doling out cash for correct answers) and ordered a \$300 Chinese-food lunch last spring to reward eighth graders who passed the state science test. (*For a School, Hope and a Fresh Start*, The New York Times, Section 14LI, Pg. 1, September 16, 2007.)

Speaking for themselves, teachers struck a different chord. Consider this Jim Lehrer report on NCLB:

JOHN MERROW, Special Correspondent for Education: We first met Anthony Cody in 1999, when he was teaching science at Bret Harte Middle School in Oakland, California.

ANTHONY CODY: There are some investigations that we've already begun using shadows and using the sun.

JOHN MERROW: A gifted teacher, Cody is nationally certified, a distinction that only 2 percent of teachers ever attain. And Cody shared his expertise mentoring other teachers.

ANTHONY CODY: As a teacher, my first priority is my own 90-some students. But thinking broadly, I really try to work with other teachers across the district. And I can reach more students in that way, by supporting new teachers, trying to give them some fresh ideas to work with in the classroom.

So the shadow starts where?

STUDENT: From the base of the thing.

JOHN MERROW: Eight years have passed, and when we caught up with Anthony Cody this time, his outlook had changed.

ANTHONY CODY: I'm seeing a lot of desperation on the part of teachers, a lot of frustration. Out of the group of six teachers that I've worked with for a long time, only one is still in the classroom.

JOHN MERROW: Cody believes the change in teacher morale dates back to 2002 and the No Child Left Behind law.

ANTHONY CODY: No Child Left Behind has cast a pall over the whole urban educational system. It has created unrealistic expectations and punished us for not meeting them. (*The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, August 16, 2007.)

In sum, the overwhelmingly negative assessment of teachers, their preparation and the unions that represent them was well-represented in media coverage. Perhaps most important as a finding here is the fact that these articles did very little to “set up” or introduce the idea that teachers were a problematic part of the educational system; the news coverage in this way simply acknowledged this notion as a common cultural narrative.

### **Education Reform is *Really* about What Happens Downtown.**

A fifth and final goal of education reform in media coverage was the transformation of aspects of the educational system that reside “outside” of the classroom and in the hands of power brokers “downtown.” News accounts of education reform focused almost exclusively on the “downtown” debate (discussions from political power brokers about what reforms were likely to be emerging, etc.). These debates were rarely connected to the activities that take place *in* classrooms (except for standardized testing) and did not reflect the challenges of daily life for students and their teachers in the classroom. Instead, the news accounts focused on state and local schools district battles over various educational policies (e.g., teacher compensation, extending the school day, standardized testing, etc.) to the near exclusion of discussions of pedagogy, student-teacher interactions and alternative forms of student learning.

We have more than 1 million annual reasons to stop playing rhetorical political games and ***ignoring that educational success is forged outside of the classroom.*** (*Stopping Dropouts Starts at Home*, The Detroit News, June 17, 2008.)

The No Child Left Behind law tries to get there by mandating annual math and reading tests and sanctions schools that don’t show improvement. Kozol lambasted that approach for “turning thousands of inner-city schools into Dickensian test-preparation factories.” It has effectively “dumbed down” school for poor, urban kids and created “a parallel curriculum that would be rejected out-of-hand” in the suburbs. Yet, when I pressed him to disclose whether he found any benefit to No Child Left Behind, he observed, after thinking for a few moments, that while there was no dramatic benefit, he appreciated one thing. The program, backed by President Bush, had revived the notion that ***successful schools were in the national interest, not just state and local.*** (*Ideally, Vision of Education Bests Politics*, Chicago Tribune, Zone C, Pg. 23, September 19, 2007.)

The media presentations of education reform would do a great public service if they more explicitly linked the “downtown” concerns of reformers to public’s concerns about “my neighborhood” and “my children’s classroom.” Because the media coverage of education reform fixates on those aspects of reform that take place outside of the classroom, the public is left to wonder how any of the reform efforts would affect their own children, their classrooms and their neighborhoods. At the most basic level, enrolling the public in support for education reform policies would seem to necessitate a more explicit link in this direction.

### ***Media Coverage of Specific Efforts to Reform Educational Systems***

In this media analysis, it was especially important to delineate specific education reform efforts that were incorporated into popular media accounts because the nature, size, scope and scale of education reform as presented by the media is so broad. The earlier, more descriptive, media content analysis that FrameWorks published as a companion to this more “cognitive” analysis found that there was a legitimate and fairly sustained focus on policy solutions in the media coverage on education reform. While we find this trend quite promising, unfortunately the solutions presented by the media came bundled with two entailments that derailed the potentially positive aspects of presenting solutions as part of this coverage: (1) solutions were typically presented as “wish lists” rather than as feasible options for debate and exploration; and (2) these solutions were almost always engulfed in decidedly negative discussions about their feasibility, desirability or fate as political objects.

#### **Presenting Solutions as Wish Lists.**

In the media coverage of education reform, specific education reform plans were typically viewed and presented literally as “wish lists” (and we do mean literally as lists).

#### ***How can we do public education differently? Here’s a wish list...***

- Recognize that teachers count most in increasing student achievement. Award generous merit pay to teachers for classroom performance. Respect the many superior teachers by ending Soviet-style equal pay increases.
- End future teacher stipends for out-of-field masters and doctoral degrees, some generated by Internet diploma mills. Instead, spend precious tax dollars on salary boosts to address desperate teaching needs.
- Give principals greater latitude in decision-making and budgeting so they can adapt schools to their students and communities. Tie increased flexibility to higher student achievement goals.
- Offer parents options in how and where their children are educated by increasing the number of high-quality public schools of choice — charter schools. The one-size-fits-hardly-anyone approach has outlived its relevancy.

Some states, school systems and other industrialized countries have embraced these and other initiatives with encouraging results. Uncomfortable to the entrenched status quo, yes. Untried and unproven, no.

More of the same so-called reforms won't help Mary and Johnny learn. Real change will. (*Public Education; Genuine Reform Can't Be Comfy*, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Editorial 13A, December 24, 2007.)

Many educators want the law altered to allow schools credit for softer measures of achievement, such as improved attendance, graduation and enrollment in Advanced

Placement classes. They also want changes to how special education and non-English speaking students are tested. (*Bush Touts School Reform Law; But Critics Cast Doubt on Renewal of No Child Left Behind*, Chicago Tribune, News Section Zone 3, January 8, 2008.)

Here are some examples of cost effective approaches:

- In evaluating schools, raise the visibility of the dropout rate as a measure of success, while deemphasizing test scores. Reward schools for holding onto difficult students, rather than for losing them.
- Require that schools eliminate MCAS preparation courses and achieve increased scores through broader and more engaging curriculum offerings.
- Require that schools eliminate the policy of holding students back based on their MCAS scores.
- Require that secondary schools move their start time to 8 a.m. or later. This would be particularly effective in many urban and rural districts where students often have to leave home by 5:30 or 6 a.m. to get to school on time.
- Require that schools provide enough books so that students can take them home for study and homework. Currently in Boston and other urban districts, schools maintain only one set of books per subject in each classroom.
- Require that schools provide art, music, theater, and life skills course offerings both during the school day and as after-school, extracurricular programs. (*The Education Gap*, Boston Globe, Editorial Page, Pg A15, April 9, 2008.)

***Actually, “ambitious” may be an understatement.*** ... Although Patrick is still waiting on a report from his Readiness Project for specifics (expected in March or April), his 10-year vision includes universal early education for 3- and 4-year-olds; all-day kindergarten; smaller class sizes, especially in the younger grades; extended school days with time for music, art, exercise, and community service; at least three years of mandatory math and science in all high schools; better teacher training; and the opportunity to earn an associate’s degree or apprenticeship in a trade — at the Commonwealth’s expense. No wonder people wanted to know about the price tag. (*Patrick’s Education Overhaul*, The Boston Globe, Editorial, Pg. A14, January 11, 2008.)

The presentation of solutions in the news media is a positive aspect of coverage. Even solutions, however, must be carefully framed to take advantage of their full potential to increase public support and engagement. The problem of offering *lists* of policy options to the public without sufficient attention to a causal story about *why* such options are useful, *how* such options fit into or address broader social problems in the educational system, and *what* sorts of impacts we can expect them to have on education reform goals, is problematic. Furthermore, the fact that the



scope of education reform has been defined in very narrow ways, these ambitious lists of solutions appear almost as non sequiturs to the public. As we note in our work more generally on framing, it is counterproductive to resort to lists of solutions without sufficient attention to the contexts in which those solutions are to be employed and incorporated into systems. FrameWorks' research clearly suggests that lists "run the risk of serving as triggers for dominant frames, so in general, you should stay away from them and tell a more coherent story about causes and effects."<sup>24</sup>

### **Tone Matters.**

A second concern is that the solutions presented in news accounts were typically offered with such deprecatory overtones that any potential public enthusiasm is likely to be counteracted and diffused by this coverage.<sup>25</sup> There were several characteristics of the media coverage that contributed to a general deprecatory tone. First, coverage tended to characterize ideas about reform as particularly grandiose rather than pragmatic and thoughtful. Second, reform ideas were characterized as ill-planned or "incomplete." Third, the enormity of the social problems that cause low student achievement were discussed in ways that reinvigorated and reinforced the notion that actually improving the education system through reform was extremely unlikely. Finally, the reform efforts were commonly discussed as a matter of political maneuvering rather than as social problems in the hands of capable, responsive policymakers.

### **Grandiose Expectations**

One unmistakable finding from our media analysis is that proposals for improving schools and academic achievement are covered with tremendous derision and are presented as grandiose and utopian.

*A parade of education reform swept metropolitan Detroit this past week, full of pomp and promises. Amid the fiery rhetoric, however, signs of the status quo quietly remained. ... Detroit administrators and union leaders have a terrible national reputation for being rigid, defensive and militantly close-minded. They need to demonstrate they're ready to make a radical break from the past. So far, that hasn't happened. It was yet another sign that the status quo is very much intact when it comes to Detroit's extraordinarily troubled schools. (School Transition or Status Quo for Detroit?, The Detroit News, Editorial, A14, April 28, 2008.)*

*I love idealists. They offer us a vision of how things might be if our lawmakers truly lived up to our dreams. Yet, like overzealous soldiers in combat, they sometimes make you want to grab them by the collar and pull them out of the line of fire. (Ideally, Vision of Education Bests Politics, Chicago Tribune, Zone C, Pg. 23, September 19, 2007.)*

These quotes are just two exemplars of the general tone that was characteristic of the media coverage around education reform. This coverage is heavily cynical not so much about the policy solutions themselves but about the lack of political will and the political processes needed to bring policy solutions to fruition. This derision was pervasive and we address it in more detail below.

### **Education Reform as Political Spectacle**

Education reform was systemically presented in the media as a political spectacle. More than anything else, representations of education reform in the media as a game of political football (rather than as a sincere search for public solutions to compelling social problems) are especially damaging to efforts to engage public support and confidence. Media coverage of education reform was ripe with representations of earnest efforts at implementing policy reforms being “chewed-up” by the local political machinery.

The time has come for Congress to vote on whether to reauthorize the No Child Left Behind law. ... ***Mostly, the conversation will be about two things. Not reading and arithmetic — but power and control.*** It will be about whether those things should rest in Washington or with local schools. From there, we’ll probably meander into a conversation about whether a law that requires yearly tests of all students hurts schools by fostering what teachers unions insist is a “teach to the test” mentality; and whether it is fair to punish low-performing schools by threatening to withhold federal funds until test scores improve; and whether districts are given enough funds to meet the law’s requirements. And, for a minute, it might sound like the naysayers who fight education reform are really concerned about what’s best for children. Don’t believe it. The education reform battle has always pitted the interests of children who attend schools against the interests of the adults who depend on these schools for their livelihoods. If students are failing to learn — something we’ll only find out through testing — then it must be true that adults are failing to teach them. And we must correct that. (*What Others Are Saying*, Chicago Tribune, Section C, Pg. 22, September 13, 2007.)

***Otherwise, there’s not much hope that our state Legislature will do anything inspired or even mildly innovative in education.*** With tax battles expected to dominate the 2008 General Assembly, and with Republican leaders reluctant to do anything more than tinker, meaningful education reform probably won’t make the agenda. (*Teachable Time for Legislature; Lawmakers Must Stop Waffling, Devise Blueprint to Improve State’s Schools*, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Editorial, 6D, November 11, 2007.)

***The maxim “No good deed goes unpunished” applies in the bitter 2nd Congressional District Democratic primary struggle, where Jared Polis is being battered because he has fought for educational opportunities for poor and minority kids even at the cost of angering entrenched special interests.*** Any day now, Polis will be hauled before the House Un-Teacher Union Activities Committee (HUUAC) and asked the dreaded question: “Are you now or have you ever been in favor of giving poor parents the same

choices for their children’s education that the rich have always enjoyed?” (*Limousine Liberals Try to Run Over Jared Polis*, The Denver Post, Bob Ewegen Column A-32, December 1, 2007.)

That’s a vision of how things might be if our lawmakers truly lived up to our dreams. Hunger strikes can call attention to that vision, ***but it’s going to take political leadership to make that dream come true.*** (*Ideally, Vision of Education Bests Politics*, Chicago Tribune, Zone C, Pg. 23, September 19, 2007.)

Even media coverage that was sought to contextualize the difficulty of enacting education reforms bowed to the notion that success would be won, not by policymakers persuaded to act on the behalf of engaged citizens, but singularly by the relationships forged among local power brokers.

The successful funding of education reform in the 1990s was largely a function of good working relationships with former governor Weld and leaders in the House and Senate. (*Cheaper Than Ignorance*, Boston Globe, Editorial Page, Pg. D8, June 29, 2008.)

As such, this media drove home the notion that any successful efforts at education reform would come because of political deal brokering (especially by special interests like unions) as opposed to policymaker responsiveness to constituents. At the most basic level, this sort of reporting is likely to have a negative impact on already-low public expectations and confidence that public policy solutions offered by policymakers actually reflect legitimate societal needs rather than the political needs of policymakers. These patterns of media presentation are the most damaging of all the media representations of education reform because they so easily connect with and activate two of the most pernicious policy-unproductive American cultural models: (1) *government as comprised of self-interested, self-serving (and often corrupt) politicians* — who are more interested in amassing political power and being re-elected than solving social problems; and (2) *government as inherently inefficient and unnecessarily bureaucratic in its decision-making* — often referred to as “gridlock” or “red tape” by the lay public.<sup>26</sup>

We see the potential for these models to be activated even by media commentators who are not specifically trying to draw the public into these patterns of thinking, but are merely trying to describe the challenges of institutional agenda-setting, incremental change, and office-holding. As such, even those commentators focused on explaining to the public how education reform efforts can get stuck in the local political machinery, still activated the same negative cultural models for thinking about policy and social change.

***Governors are often reluctant to meddle too deeply in education. It’s often a political loser, too complicated, too many constituencies, and too hard to measure success.*** If and when Patrick runs for reelection two years from now, we probably won’t have a clear

idea whether his education proposals have succeeded. That is anathema to politicians.

***What good is a politically messy idea that doesn't help you get reelected?*** (*Education is Patrick's Test*, The Boston Globe, Metro Section Pg. B1, June 27, 2007.)

While schools are working harder than ever, students still don't fare well by many key measures, including national standardized testing, graduation rates and college attendance. ***But no one in leadership is willing to rankle the established bureaucracies that would be affected by real change***, and former Gov. Roy Barnes, defeated in his bid for re-election in part by opposition from teachers, takes the blame for that. "I wanted to push education reform to the point where it was bipartisan and accepted," Barnes says. "My defeat led future leaders to take the safe route and leave education alone. I can't believe that has happened, but someone will arise. I just hope I live to see it." (*Give Education a Shock of Excellence; Higher Salaries, Early Graduation Age Worth a Try to Boost Students, Teachers*, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Editorial Page, Pg. 14A, September 25, 2007.)

I think these two camps tend to make the same analytic mistake. Ten or 20 years ago, the dominant givers in education were trying to work through districts. There was the Kellogg Foundation, the Packard Foundation, the Ford Foundation, all working from the inside. The biggest example was the Annenberg Foundation. In 1993, former Ambassador Walter Annenberg went to the White House and announced a \$500 million gift to education. He said, essentially, "We need to drop a bomb on American urban education to shake things up." Local foundations made matching gifts, so Annenberg's \$500 million was leveraged into more than \$1 billion, invested in more than a dozen communities. And generally speaking, it was a substantial disappointment. There was very little change in an ongoing, meaningful way. You know, there's a reason that Univac wasn't able just to become I.B.M., and there's a reason I.B.M. couldn't just become Microsoft and Microsoft couldn't just become Google. Organizations bake in the assumptions and the processes that made them successful. The way you hire your people, the way you reward your people, the internal practices you devise — they are all built around a certain set of assumptions and operations. When that larger world changes, it's tough to retool. ***So when these reform-minded superintendents come in, like Alan Bersin when he arrived in San Diego or Paul Vallas when he got to Philadelphia or Joel Klein here in New York, they face enormous challenges. A school system is not an agile, nimble organization where if you can just hire the right people and start the right programs, you can turn things around quickly. You've got to work your way around outdated staffing processes, inadequate and bulky information-technology systems, abysmal and poorly conceived data-management systems.*** Alan Bersin was five years into his tenure in San Diego before teachers stopped putting transfer requests into a wooden box. (*How Many Billionaires Does it Take to Fix a School System?* New York Times, Section MM, Column O, Magazine, Pg. 50, March 9, 2008.)

This is not to say, of course, that the media is wrong in its description of the reality of the politics of education reform. To the contrary, most of the cities we chose for inclusion in this study are

embroiled in particularly pernicious battles around educational policy as budgets and other resources shrink while demand for services and calls for improvements in educational outcomes continue to rise. Our point is, instead, that the way this political in-fighting was presented in the media and how it “stuck to” discussions of potential education reforms is likely to dampen any public enthusiasm, deliberation or innovative thinking about education reform.

Republicans were enamored with the accountability piece, and Democrats liked that it focused more money and attention on the performance of low-income and minority students. But the centrist coalition that got the law approved has since splintered. Republicans and many governors now say they resent the federal intrusion into local schools. Democrats and teachers unions argue the law was never fully funded and focuses too much on punishments. (*Bush Touts School Reform Law; But Critics Cast Doubt on Renewal of No Child Left Behind*, Chicago Tribune, News Section Zone 3, January 8, 2008.)

Over the past week and a half, parents and teachers have been shocked by the math scores of our fifth- and eighth-graders. Who is to blame? Is it the fault of the test or a new curriculum? It would be easy to blame our teachers and administrators, but that would be misplaced and counterproductive. The people whom Georgians should hold accountable are those under the Gold Dome of our state Capitol. In the past six years, our elected state leaders have cut a billion and a half dollars from our schools. While they’ve found money for everything from bass fishing tournaments to tax cuts for the special interests who fund their campaigns, they’ve been unwilling to live up to the state government’s funding commitment to our schools. (*PERDUE VS. BARNES; The Right Road for Schools: For Success, Follow N.C.’s Proven Map*, Atlanta-Journal Constitution, @Issue, Pg. IE, June 1, 2008.)

There were many feature stories about the political wrangling associated with local politics and education reform but editorials pages were especially keen on this issue. In fact, many of the same editorial commentators wrote articles that were reflected in multiple news market areas and across media outlets.<sup>27</sup> A good example was Joe Williams — an education reporter with the New York Daily News and author of the book *Cheating our Kids: How Politics and Greed Ruin Education* — who penned a barrage of similar opinion editorials in newspapers across the country that essentially argued that the politics around education reform efforts were choking the life out of those efforts.

To make matters worse, during the period for which we collected news, a contested and crowded field of political candidates vied for the presidency of the United States. As education is typically a high priority issue among American voters, every candidate (no matter how long the odds of his/her winning the presidency) developed a set of specific policy proposals to improve American schools and actively sought media attention to publicize those proposals. In the media coverage of those candidates, the collective handwringing and (mostly rhetorical) speeches about

“what to do about America’s schools” was very much reflected in the coverage of the candidates, especially in television news outlets.

Obama and McCain have addressed K-12 education here and there. McCain is a strong supporter of No Child Left Behind, which sets math and reading achievement benchmarks, but says it needs to be strengthened. Obama has been more critical of the law and its emphasis on test scores. He has also proposed bonus pay for teachers who get extra training or whose students receive high scores on standardized tests. But Klein, Sharpton and others at the National Press Club yesterday said that unless the next president spends money to steer high-quality teachers into low-performing schools, the achievement gap will persist. (*Standing Up for Children; New Group Pushes Education Reform as Campaign Issue*, Washington Post, A Section, Pg. A21, June 12, 2008.)

Moreover, there seemed to be much more talk about education reforms from Democratic candidates and as such, more media cynicism and scrutiny of Democratic education reform proposals.

Both Obama and Clinton “recognize how badly schools are failing low-income kids in this country” said Whitney Tilson, an investor who is involved with charter schools and helped form the group called Democrats for Education Reform. “But the question is, ‘So what?’ If they aren’t willing to say what they believe and advocate for meaningful reforms for a broken system, does it mean anything that they understand?” (*Cheaper Than Ignorance*, Boston Globe, Editorial Page, Pg. D8, June 29, 2008.)

More generally though, the education reform coverage from the presidential election tended to be more descriptive and about the campaign platforms of the candidates. This example about Bill Richardson was typical of the tropes at play in this coverage: a brief visit to a local area (usually with a poor or “failing school” in the backdrop of the camera lens) and big (perhaps, “grandiose”) policy proposals reflected in a shortened version of the general stump speech.

Democratic presidential candidate Bill Richardson made his first trip to Georgia on Friday, loaded with a promise to scrap President Bush’s attempt at education reform and replace it with a nationally guaranteed minimum annual salary of \$40,000 for beginning teachers. (*Richardson Focuses on Educational Reform*, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Metro News Section, 5B, October 6, 2007.)

The presidential campaign was not just left to the job candidates — as the nation was judging the merits of political candidates for the presidency, the President made quite a few headlines by staging some of his own press events around education reform (especially when it was time to reauthorize his signature education policy — No Child Left Behind) as well as by having his emissaries make the rounds on the Sunday morning political shows.

President Bush came to Chicago on Monday to promote No Child Left Behind and lay the groundwork for renewal of his signature domestic initiative — a once-popular education reform that’s quickly losing its luster. Standing in the library of Greeley Elementary School on the North Side, Bush praised the law and pushed Congress to extend it before he leaves office. “I know No Child Left Behind has worked and I believe this country needs to build upon the successes,” Bush said. “We worked together to get the bill written in the first place, and I believe we can work together to get it reauthorized... The act [law] will continue on — in other words, this act isn’t expiring,” he said. “It just needs to be reauthorized.” (*Bush Touts School Reform Law; But Critics Cast Doubt on Renewal of No Child Left Behind*, Chicago Tribune, News Section Zone 3, January 8, 2008.)

... we brought them together to pass tax cuts. We brought them together to — this president brought them together to pass education reform and energy legislation. But in this town, it’s really tough, like when we tackled immigration and Social Security reform, there’s some Democrats who never accepted it — him as president after 2000, and there’re some Democrats who said, you know, the right path for their party was to obstruct him no matter what. And there’re others who, while they understand the utility of working together in a spirit of bipartisanship, feel constrained by their caucus that doesn’t sometimes want to give the president, quote, “a political victory.” I’ve had Democrat members of Congress tell me, “We’d love to work with you on Social Security reform, but our party’s leaders are afraid of giving the president a, quote, ‘political victory’.” (*Retiring White House Adviser Karl Rove Discusses His Career and Current Political Issues*, CBS Face the Nation, August 19, 2007.)

The sharp partisan tone of the coverage of education reform (made even more pungent by a crowded field of presidential candidates jockeying for position) may have made it even more difficult for the public to resist the cultural models that they associate with government and elected officials (*government as comprised of self-interested, self-serving (and often corrupt) politicians and government as inherently inefficient and unnecessarily bureaucratic in its decision-making*). In an ironic way, the increase in media coverage around education reform because of the presidential campaign may have actually been successful in driving the public back to these (and other) cultural models that works to diminish support for many promising education proposals.

### **The Assumed Superiority of the Private Sector and the Business Model**

The two negative constructions of government we identified in the last section have always served to entice the public to put more faith in markets and in competitive forms of problem solving than in government processes. Education reform efforts have been no different and the undercurrents of strong American cultural models around entrepreneurship, financial incentives, and private sector ingenuity were well represented within the media coverage.

The plan is dramatic, as perhaps it must be given what's at stake: End high school at age 16. ***Take schools away from school districts and school boards and give them to hired private contractors***, most likely liability corporations owned and run by teachers. Fund schools from the state rather locally. Pay teachers \$95,000 a year, but demand quality. (*Give Education a Shock of Excellence; Higher Salaries, Early Graduation Age Worth a Try to Boost Students, Teachers*, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Editorial Page, Pg. 14A, September 25, 2007.)

Recovery School District Superintendent Paul G. Vallas, who took over last summer, has embarked on a two-year reform plan. ***He believes strategic shifts, such as industry-based instruction to prepare students for the workplace***, can turn New Orleans into a national model for public education. (*New Orleans Mayor Upbeat About Recovery Prospects; Skeptical Residents View 2008 as 'Make or Break' Year*, Washington Post, A Section, Pg. A03, January 6, 2008.)

In fact, this Legislature's approach to education reform can be distilled to a single premise — abandon traditional public schools. “The only coherent policy we've been seeing is lockstep execution of a plan to gradually disinvest in public education while simultaneously breaking it up through charter and voucher legislation — promoting the marketplace solution,” says Tim Callahan of the Professional Association of Georgia Educators. “When the current leadership in our state gets done with their business experiment, we may well have set our public schools back by decades.” (*Disinvesting in Our Children; Marketplace Solutions Not the Answer to Improving Georgia's Public Schools*, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Editorial Page, Pg. 8C, February 17, 2008.)

Mayor Cory A. Booker stopped by as part of a tour of some of the city's 77 public schools. Mr. Booker bounded from room to room, dispensing \$1 bills to students who had mastered New Jersey history (what is the capital?) and politics (who is the governor?).

Then Mr. Booker came up with a stumper, worthy of \$5.

“Who is the vice president of America?” the mayor asked a fifth-grade class. “Come on, I know some people want to forget ...”

“George Bush?” guessed one boy.

“George Washington?” said another.

“George Washington Carver?” a third chimed in.

Though the mayor prodded the eager students, no one could name the vice president. Finally, Mr. Booker put his money away.

“All right,” he said. “You have a lot to do this school year.” (*For a School, Hope and a Fresh Start*, The New York Times, Section 14LI, Pg. 1, September 16, 2007.)



It is important to note here that the interest in private sector solutions was not just about using monetary incentives to motivate various actors in the system (e.g., paying teachers *and* students to motivate them to excel in the classroom or providing instruction that is based specifically on corporate needs), but was also about the idea of cost-savings. The latter is no small issue when states (as primary funders of elementary and secondary education) are facing enormous budget shortfalls and demographic trends that necessitate more spending. We take this issue up in the next section.

### **Money vs. Reform**

School funding is a complicated issue for education reformers. Since property taxes are the primary sources of funding, there are enormous inequalities in the resources students receive in different areas. Policymakers at all levels (county, state and federal) have tried to address resource issues in various ways but the realities of vast inequalities persist and remain controversial in a country that valorizes the notion of “equal opportunity” as an avenue to social mobility.

It is not surprising then to find that discussions about school funding tended to be at the top of media coverage of education reform. In fact, this point was one of the key findings from FrameWorks’ earlier descriptive media content analysis. More specifically, that report found that funding issues were often juxtaposed to reform proposals in the media as “calls for more funding sometimes went hand in hand with other reforms since many reforms would require money to pay for changes”.<sup>28</sup> Our examination of the media coverage confirms this finding but nuances it by adding that funding considerations presented alongside policy reforms may have the effect of mitigating enthusiasm for the seemingly “grandiose” proposals presented by reformers.

***The Patrick administration is rich in ideas about how to improve the quality of education in Massachusetts but wanting in ways to pay for them.*** ... But the public should be aware that it took about \$2 billion in new funding to fully develop the Education Reform Act throughout the 1990s. With education secretary-designate Paul Reville now calling to ‘overhaul the whole system,’ it is hard to imagine spending requirements will be much lower. (*Cheaper Than Ignorance*, Boston Globe, Editorial Page, Pg. D8, June 29, 2008.)

A significant amount of the discussion about education reform revolved around funding and, with it, lots of debate about specific funding mechanisms (e.g., higher sales taxes, new lotteries, casinos, property taxes, etc.). However, the juxtaposition of policy solutions with policy funding in the media limited opportunities for the public to think about the merits of the reform ideas presented, before having to consider the financial value of those proposals.

This is not to say that the public should be shielded from understanding the full ramifications of the cost implications of various reform ideas. Cost concerns are no small matter in any economy but are especially pressing in the current economic condition. Under these circumstances, it would be a disservice for journalists not to convey the broader financial impacts of education policy proposals. The point we make here, however, is two-fold. First, the costs of education reform proposals are typically addressed in an entirely negative format. This information could be presented in a much more neutral way. An example of how this could be different comes from a Chicago Tribune article:

In the past six months, something quiet yet significant has happened in this state's education debate. For the first time in memory, education and political leaders have started shifting away from the usual "more money" mantra and talking in a more sophisticated way about which strategies work best to improve student learning. How to spend money wisely. How to assure taxpayers of results in exchange for greater investment. Don't give up on education. The ideas are there, with or without a lot of cash. (*Is There Will to Help Schools*, Chicago Tribune, News, Zone C, Pg. 18, July 23, 2007.)

Second, the relationship between education reform policies and their monetary costs are rarely framed in ways that put those costs in perspective. At FrameWorks, we would say that the articles could better reflect *social math* on the issue. In general, the public has great difficulty interpreting the size and effect of cost data. Is \$10 million, \$50 million, or \$1 billion enough to transform schools? How would the public effectively judge the cost effectiveness of these numbers? Take the following news report for example:

Rhee said schools were selected based on their "walkability" and other factors, including declining enrollment. Noting the school system's \$50 million utility bill, she said the closures would save money that could go toward teachers and programs. But several education advocates testified that the cost savings would be less than the approximately \$23 million Fenty and Rhee have projected. "If these 23 schools are closed, it isn't really going to save us a lot of money, and it's not going to allow us to do exciting new enrichment programs," said Mary Levy, director of the Public Education Reform Project for the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs. Levy put the savings at about \$14 million, based on her own analysis. Because finance officials have projected a deficit in the nearly \$1 billion school budget, Levy said any savings would probably first be put toward closing that gap. "Unless the council comes up with some other funding source, there's not just going to be the money there, for anything," Levy said. (*Hearing on School Closings is Long and Emotional; Anger, Sadness Mingle at Council Hearing*, Washington Post, Metro, B01, January 15, 2008.)

Is a \$50 million utility bill for schools operating in the District reasonable, high or low? Would a potential cost savings of \$23 million (or \$14 million as the dispute goes) be enough to free up

substantial resources in the District’s budget and to warrant closing schools that are more convenient to hundreds of poor parents in the city? Are the 23 schools that are closing “a lot” in the context of the total number of schools operating in the District? Without some good social math (or contextualization), how is this information helpful to the public? Moreover, the way this information is presented in the preceding quote is likely to engender more trepidation and anxiety than confidence in the District’s decision to reform its education system in this manner.

Information about the costs of reform would be more useful to the public if they were contextualized in way that facilitated perspective. An example of the use of social math can be seen in the following excerpt:

The Dallas Independent School District, with help from community partners, is creating arts “hubs” in libraries and other community facilities. The district also plans to hire 140 new music and arts teachers in the next three years, with a goal of exposing elementary school students to 45 minutes of art and music in school each week. ***It will cost the district about \$7 million out of its budget of more than \$1 billion.*** Advocates say it is money well spent. (*Working in a Daily Dose of the Arts; With Less Money and More Focus on Testing, Schools are Looking for Creative Ways to Teach Music and Art*, Los Angeles Times, Part E, Pg. 15, January 30, 2008.)

This quote, although still problematic in some respects, helps the reader understand the cost of the proposals in the context of the overall district budget. While these numbers could be further contextualized, the story is of note because of the attempt made to juxtapose cost data in relationship to some other meaningful part of the budget equation. Thus, both avoiding overly negative assessments of cost data and contextualizing that data to allow for more interpretation and meaning would go a long to avoid the traps inherent in media coverage of education reform.

### **The Enormity of Education Reform Efforts**

The presentation of the broader challenges facing educational institutions posed another kind of challenge. When the media coverage provided a context in terms of the broader structural challenges facing schools and school systems, they did so in ways that made the task of improving educational outcomes seem foolhardy and unrealistic.

When I taught high school, I noticed students from the most stable families and loving communities usually were the most successful. Some of my brightest students were not free to perform well because of chaos at home. Kids from abusive homes and children of divorced or absentee parents did not normally perform well regardless of aptitude. I had students who regularly received low marks but would score high on aptitude and IQ tests. A child is more effective in school when he or she believes his or her life has meaning and that he or she can make a difference. What better incentive to learn about the world

and learn a skill set than the knowledge that someday one will make a contribution to making the world a better place? Materialism and consumption eventually fail to provide incentives for struggling kids to persevere. A high school student who is depressed, abusing drugs, suicidal and nihilistic couldn't care less about the threat of "flipping burgers" for life. A child must have a moral maturity to make good decisions in his or her long-term interests. This is helped by the wise counsel of parents and other supportive adults and peers. Struggling adolescents whose decisions sabotage their own progress will not make it. Regardless of race or class, education reform will only be successful in concert with other needed reforms. Family, self-efficacy and morality work in concert like one of Bach's Brandenburg concertos. (*Stopping Dropouts Starts at Home*, The Detroit News, Opinion, Pg. 9A June 17, 2008.)

The idea of contextualizing the educational issues in front of policymakers is potentially positive and may be effective in illuminating some of the structural forces that challenge educators and, by extension, reformers in improving schools. However, the news accounts of these structural barriers may well serve to dampen enthusiasm about the potential for change by presenting reforms as paltry against the enormity of social and systemic challenges.

Newton's students learn their lessons in a rambling, red-brick building dating to the 1870s. Inside, freshly painted hallways lead to roomy classrooms papered with bright colors. But outside, a rundown asphalt playground is hemmed in by overgrown weeds and splotchy walls where graffiti was hastily painted over. The school is raising money through community grants and donations, more than \$140,000 so far, to rebuild the playground. A security guard keeps watch over the front door, and metal grates cover windows that overlook a low-income housing project. School begins at 8:25 a.m. with a free breakfast of cold milk and cereal for every student, served from plastic tubs delivered to their homerooms. 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.)

The idea elegantly borrows from ideals of both right and the left, but, unfortunately, smacks up against the political realities of the right and left too. After all, conservatives applaud the idea of parents having more choices and in ways that encourage competition

between schools. And liberals applaud the desegregation of schools and reduction of isolation by race and income. But in the real world, I suspect most suburban parents moved to suburbs to get away from the problems they fear, rightly or wrongly, that urban students will bring with them to school. In many cases, black middle-class suburban parents are no less worried than their white counterparts. And teachers unions and politicians fear a flight of tax dollars and other resources if they allow parents to remove their children from poor-performing schools in their urban areas. The result is a political stalemate. (*Ideally, Vision of Education Beats Politics*, Chicago Tribune, Zone C, Pg. 23, September 19, 2007.)

After consuming media around education reform, the public would be right to ask, how does an educational system succeed in promoting learning when its students are embedded within a broader framework of social problems (poverty, abuse, joblessness, stress, crime, and a host of other challenges)?

Although bringing the broader social determinants of academic achievement to public view can be a promising aspect of media coverage of education reform, it is only useful to the extent that it is incorporated in a tone that does not activate a crisis frame.<sup>29</sup> As such, if media representations of education reform were framed in ways that presented those reforms as feasible solutions with relatively good prospects for success, incorporating the challenge of the larger social forces at work might serve to invite greater public appreciation of the intricacies and complexities that reform efforts are up against.

### **Conflating Them All for “Perfect Storm”**

As has been described above, there are a variety of patterns in media coverage that have a pejorative impact on the overall tone of the coverage on education reform. These trends become even more problematic because news reports on these issues actually tended to “mix-and-match” these negative elements, resulting in a “perfect storm” effect in which the negative impact of the whole exceeds the individual negative impacts of the components. The following quotes are emblematic of the types of quotes that tended to blend some combination of “wish lists” of reforms, the enormity of social problems, the challenges of raising appropriate levels of funding for reform, and discussions about the political power games at the local level.

The Readiness Project offers a vision of universal preschool, longer school days, the expansion of scientifically tested early literacy programs, counselors in every low-income school, and the creation of Readiness Schools that put the interests of students ahead of the work rules of unions. These are just a few of the dozens of ideas that grew from the work of the 13 subcommittees. But the odds of achieving such goals are slim when the

project's subcommittee on long-term funding concludes that such enhancements 'are not likely to come from new taxes'. (*Cheaper Than Ignorance*, Boston Globe, Editorial Page, Pg, D8, June 29, 2008).

Instead of pushing through reforms of teacher benefits, Michigan legislators are busy gutting programs that could help make the state's classrooms among the best in the nation. The heralded new state high school curriculum reform is at risk of falling victim to funding cuts to solve the budget crisis. The problem isn't a shortage of education dollars; it's the skewed priorities of the Legislature. Rather than make nominal cuts in the excessive teacher health care benefit, the lawmakers prefer to undo the very education reforms they insisted on last year. This is just one example of how special interests are controlling the budget process in Lansing and blocking the structural changes needed to fix Michigan. (*Timid Lawmakers Throw Students Under the Bus*, Boston Globe, Editorial Page, Pg. D8, June 29, 2008.)

### **Presenting a Cause for Optimism about Education Reform**

Although the overall thrust of the news accounts about education reform was clearly negative, there were two genres of stories that struck a decidedly more positive tone: (1) "rags to riches" stories about individual schools that seemed to be showing some promise in lifting student achievement despite impossible structural barriers such as being located in high-poverty neighborhoods; and (2) stories about individual charismatic leaders who were able to make almost "heroic" leaps, usually at great personal sacrifice, to try and solve impossible problems in the educational system or in a school.

### **The Rags-to-Riches Stories: A Sorely Needed Success Theme in Education Coverage?**

In general, the myriad of success stories in the media coverage of education reform can be an important counterweight to the negativity that permeates discussions about American education.

The jobs of tomorrow will be filled by creative, innovative thinkers. As educators and others in Colorado ponder how to revolutionize schools, they should look no further than three in Denver that are getting it right: KIPP's Sunshine Peak Academy and The Denver School of Science and Technology, both charter schools, and Arrupe Jesuit High School, a private school. At KIPP, school days are longer and Saturday classes are the norm, as are school uniforms. At Science and Tech, teachers stay late to tutor students and are available by phone at night. Coursework is rigorous, and those who fall behind go to summer school. At Arrupe, every senior graduated this spring and they're all going to college. Expectations are sky high at each school, and they're getting results. They're each an example of how a school can change to adapt to our changing world. Massive reform won't be easy, but it's imperative. (*Changing the Future*, The Denver Post, Perspective Pg. E-04, July 8, 2007.)

With its walls covered in progress-monitoring graphs and charts showing the distribution of test scores, the principal's office at the John F. Kennedy Elementary School in Brockton has the air of a command center. At the school, where 58 percent of students are from low-income households, hard data determine what each student's day looks like. And a tight focus on reading early on is intended to help students avoid academic trouble in the future. The Kennedy School still has much to prove in the next few years, including how its literacy program matches up with performance on the state's standardized MCAS test and how well it serves low-income and minority children. But for now, the line graph appears to be rising. (*Reading by the Numbers*, Boston Globe, Editorial, A10, June 16, 2008.)

However, even these “success” stories must be framed well for them to avoid triggering familiar and unproductive cultural models. In particular, a steady diet of these types of stories can normalize exceptional examples and ultimately set unrealistic expectations for all schools.

***If there is a model for high achievement among students from low-income households it might be found in an aging brick schoolhouse in one the poorest sections of Worcester.*** The University Park Campus School is part of the city's regular public school system, and the student body at the seventh- to 12th-grade school, which opened in 1997, reflects the demographics of its tough Main South neighborhood. Three-quarters of the school's 225 students come from low-income families, and more than half are from households where English is not the first language. Most students arrive several years behind grade level in reading and math, with half of all entering seventh-graders reading at a third-grade level ... The all-out effort has paid off handsomely. Over its 11-year history, every graduate has gone on to seek a college degree, and University Park has consistently ranked in the top quarter of all Massachusetts high schools on the MCAS math and English exams. ... ***“Having a few such schools means it's possible to have such schools,”*** says Chester Finn, president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a national education policy organization. “The actual proves the possible.” (*The Answer: Fifteen Years into Education Reform*, Boston Globe, Ideas Section, D1, June 1, 2008.)

So whenever you hear about a school beating the odds, doing the impossible, defying expectations, it's usually in the context of a sports upset. Tiny Milan High School in Indiana was the basis for “Hoosiers,” after all. ***Well, in New York City, one school is pulling off the equivalent of David slaying Goliath.*** On a statewide eighth-grade math test, a public school achieved perfection. All of its students passed. That's the first time a charter school, or any school in New York City's Harlem neighborhood, has ever had a 100-percent pass rate on this particular test. So they're doing something right. Let's find out what. Deborah Kenny is the founding principal of the school. She's now the CEO of the three schools in the village academy's network. Hello Deborah. (National Public Radio, July 1, 2008.)

In addition, the public is often left to wonder what the full range of factors are that have made these success stories “successful.” This is because these factors are left unexplored or the explanations of the factors that led to success are truncated. That is, only a few of the “rags-to-riches” stories substantively explore the factors that have made those individual schools successful. More typically, discussions of what made the schools successful defaulted to improvements in student motivation and/or on a charismatic leader whose heroic efforts seemed to account for the school’s success.

These schools all share a handful of core beliefs, which shape the structure of their school day and the operation of their programs. Nearly all believe students from low-income families need more time in school, so many of them extend their school day until 5 p.m. or even later. Another key factor, say leaders of these schools, is the freedom to assemble a teaching staff fully committed to the mantra of success for all students ... But perhaps the overriding quality that distinguishes these schools is one that can’t be quantified or spelled out in a contract: a culture of high expectations for all students. ... “We need to stop making excuses for these kids,” says June Eressy, the principal at Worcester’s University Park Campus School. “You need to hold them to the same standards you would hold your own children to.” (*The Answer: Fifteen Years into Education Reform*, Boston Globe, Ideas Section, D1, June 1, 2008.)

To be sure, strong discipline and motivation are important keys to academic success; however, the media coverage often converged on this part of the overall academic achievement story in isolation of other parts of that success story of schools and students. From a framing point of view, greater information about what makes an educational program, school and/or student successful would serve as a better invitation to public engagement of the value of education reform measures. Media coverage that lacks this type of accompanying information forces people to fill the vacuum by substituting their own anecdotal perspectives or a combination of cultural models that seem to “fit”: family bubble (families are responsible for student outcomes), caring teachers (or the lack of, are responsible for student outcomes) or others. Thus, an articulate and explicit illumination of the determinants of “success” at the institutional and individual level is a valuable but often omitted component of the news coverage around education reform.

### **Charismatic Leadership: Heroic Efforts that Pay Off for Schools?**

Who better to carry the torch of education reform than charismatic leaders who, through hard work, long hours, force of personal will and personality, are able to bring about transformative change? We found that charismatic leaders were often presented in news reports as the catalysts that spearheaded the “success stories” about schools and school systems. Take for example this news report about Washington, D.C.’s Michelle Rhee:



Michelle A. Rhee estimates she has received 12,000 e-mails since becoming chancellor of the D.C. public schools three months ago — and says she has responded to every one. That kind of personal engagement pleases her boss, Mayor Adrian M. Fenty, who has tried to lend a hand whenever he can, no matter how mundane the request ... Rhee said she is not overwhelmed because she has developed a reliable response system. When she receives an e-mail, she said, she responds personally. She hears from parents with questions about facilities, staffers who haven't received paychecks, civic associations that want her to speak at their meetings. (*No Job Too Small for Fenty-Rhee Team; Hands-On Schools Approach Excites Some, Worries Others*, Washington Post, A Section, Pg. A01, September 9, 2007.)

It is important to note that charismatic leaders did not typically include teachers. Instead, as we discussed earlier in this report, teachers were generally not seen as constructive voices for change in education reform efforts. We did, however, find one story in which teachers were presented as contributors to better student outcomes. In addition, this rare piece also included a discussion of a wider range of factors that had led to the schools' success.

PESCA: But you know, I'm — both my parents were teachers. They taught in good school districts. I've taught myself. You know, if you have a class of really unruly kids, there's only so much sometimes a teacher can do. So, what do you do to make sure the atmosphere is right?

Dr. KENNY: That's a great question. So first, we attract the great teachers, and we develop them. We provide five weeks of training in the summer. Every single decision we make in everything we do, we have two things in mind. One is, of course, what's best for the children, but immediately following that is, how do you create an amazing environment for teachers? What do teachers need? And we think about this, and work on it, and come up with systems all around, how do you design a school for teachers?

And when you start to give enough thought and put enough time into that, you begin to come up with the answers. So, what you said is one example, which is, how does a teacher deal with an unruly classroom? So, we spent an enormous amount of time figuring this out, and what we did is, we came up with a list of all the behaviors that teachers wanted to see, everything we do is designed by our teachers. So we let our teachers come up with this program of, what is every single behavior you want? (*National Public Radio*, July 1, 2008.)

In any event, stories about charismatic leaders who turn around failing school districts or schools remain a familiar and well-worn feature of the media coverage of education.

The identification of promising leaders and their approaches to education reform can be a positive aspect of media coverage. In particular, this kind of media coverage allows the public to

see and point to identifiable leaders within school systems that are directly responsible for making schools better. The major challenge with the construction of the “charismatic hero” motif (other than the idea that it has the potential to normalize the exception as mentioned above) is that this type of story has the power to obscure the larger contexts in which those leaders operate and then shape educational outcomes. That is, the charismatic hero story usually does little to acknowledge the wide variety of actors and institutional supports in the educational system that enable the “hero” to function, be successful and implement reforms. Thus, the overall pattern of media coverage of these types of stories generally makes the “systems” within which our “heroes” function, largely invisible.

### ***Metaphors Used to Explain Approaches and Processes of Education Reform***

The media analysis revealed several key metaphors that policymakers use to explain either the necessity of reforming the education system in a particular direction or to defend some set of policy changes that they deemed appropriate. Metaphors are particularly useful in framing work because they help to distill complex and abstract ideas in ways that ultimately make them more palatable to the public. Moreover, they are particularly helpful in filling in the mechanisms that are operative in social issues — in clarifying how systems factors lead to specific outcomes. FrameWorks gives them full investigatory attention because we know that when people understand how an issue works, they are more likely to be engaged by the issue and lend their support to important policy reforms of the issue.<sup>30</sup> Here we present some of the more instructive metaphors that emerged during our analysis of media coverage.

### **Education Reform as Rebuilding**

If NCLB is to really improve America’s public schools, it needs to be **rebuilt**, from the bottom up. Schools must be given the autonomy to recruit, hire and coach qualified teachers. Teachers must have the skills needed to develop a well-rounded curriculum based on their students’ individual needs. Class room sizes must be smaller; teachers need to be able to provide individual attention when needed. Tutoring programs must be improved. The programs mandated by NCLB were often without students; the students who did attend received minimal instruction. These programs must be regulated and schools need to work with community groups to spread the word about their availability. (*No Child Left Behind Law Needs Overhaul*, Miami Times, 3C Vol. 85, September 27, 2007.)

In a series of articles, several education proponents talked about reform efforts as “rebuilding,” or as revising old and outdated policies that no longer serve the interests of children, but at the same time they used opposing metaphors that likened education to gambling or education reform as a “gamble.”

“We’re **rebuilding** a house” the governor said. “You design it first and then cost it out” ... It will fall to this commission to cost out the governor’s dream house. (*The Education Reform Gamble*, Boston Globe, Opinion Editorial, Pg, A9, June 26, 2008.)

### Education Reform as Climbing a Ladder

This plan approaches learning as if it were like **climbing a ladder**. To find success, a student must start at the bottom rung, then climb to the next, adding skills and competencies along the way before reaching the top. As children progress from grade to grade, they build skills, incrementally expanding their knowledge and potential. Each rung of the education ladder needs to be as sturdy as the one that came before, giving students a smooth yet rigorous climb to the top. Sadly, too many of our students never reach the final rung, as demonstrated by the nearly 30 percent of high school students who drop out before graduation and by the many students who need remedial education in college or leave college soon after arriving. (*The Education Reform Gamble*, Boston Globe, Opinion Editorial, Pg. A9, June 26, 2008.)

### Education Reform as Facilitating Entrepreneurship

Under the commission’s plan, school districts would not own or operate schools but rather oversee a **field of entrepreneurs** — often times teachers — who contractually agree to run schools and would have to meet performance standards, much as charter schools do now. Funds would come from the state, and schools would have full discretion over spending, staffing, scheduling and programs. But they would have to meet accountability standards imposed by the state. (*Give Education a Shock of Excellence; Higher Salaries, Early Graduation Age Worth a Try to Boost Students, Teachers*, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Editorial Page, Pg. 14A, September 25, 2007.)

### Education Reform as a Tool and “Retooling”

Despite this evidence, some still argue that we should focus on other, more politically viable reforms, such as charter schools. But education reform is not a zero sum game. Charter schools do provide an improvement over the status quo. So do vouchers, which are proving an even **more effective tool**. (*Don’t Write Them Off; Vouchers are an Effective Tool to Boost Performance, Assist Families*, USA Today, Editorial Page, Pg. 11A, February 12, 2008.)

“We need to drop a bomb on American urban education to shake things up.” ... Organizations bake in the assumptions and the processes that made them successful. The way you hire your people, the way you reward your people, the internal practices you devise — they are all built around a certain set of assumptions and operations. When that larger world changes, it’s tough to **retool**. So when these reform-minded superintendents come in, like Alan Bersin when he arrived in San Diego or Paul Vallas when he got to

Philadelphia or Joel Klein here in New York, they face enormous challenges. A school system is not an agile, nimble organization where if you can just hire the right people and start the right programs, you can turn things around quickly. (*How Many Billionaires Does It Take To Fix a School System?* New York Times, Magazine, Section MM, Column O, March 9, 2008.)

Out on the campaign trail, Romney hasn't highlighted his support for school accountability, perhaps because many conservatives dislike federal meddling in local education. As he **retools** his message after second-place finishes in Iowa and New Hampshire, Romney would do well to talk more about his record on education. (*Straight talk about schools; On education reform, one candidate stands out*, USA Today, News, Pg. 8A, January 14, 2008.)

The grants, which represent a significant private investment toward fixing the District's public schools, will be administered independently of the school system. The funders said they hope the grants will help nonprofit groups give voice to parents, students and residents as they seek to influence schools Chancellor Michelle A. Rhee's **retooling** agenda. (*Grants Will Aid Groups Working for Education Reform*, Washington Post, Metro, Section B, Pg. 2, June 27, 2008.)

### **Education Reform as Re-facing a Wall**

As obvious as that declaration sounds, Georgia's majority party lacks any guiding blueprint for improving the state's schools. As Weber admitted, he and his colleagues are busy **putting bricks in the wall** without any idea of what the completed wall should look like when they're done. (*Teachable Time for Legislature; Lawmakers Must Stop Waffling, Devise Blueprint to Improve State's Schools*, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Editorial, 6D, November 11, 2007.)

### **Education Reform as Window Dressing**

Talk about public education reform is like **a cheap dress**. Adding lace around the hem and pressing with starch won't turn it into couture. Likewise, gussying up public education won't make Mary and Johnny learn. Real change will. (*Public Education; Genuine Reform Can't Be Comfy*, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Editorial 13A, December 24, 2007.)

### **Education Reform as Train Wreck**

"It's time for truth-telling on this issue," Knapp told legislators. "Education is not a train wreck about to occur; it's a **train wreck** that has already occurred." (*Give Education a Shock of Excellence; Higher Salaries, Early Graduation Age Worth a Try to Boost Students, Teachers*, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Editorial Page, Pg. 14A, September 25, 2007.)

### Education Reform as Gambling

No Child Left Behind, supposedly an antidote to the “soft bigotry of low expectations,” has instead spawned lowered standards. The law will eventually be reauthorized because doubling down on *losing bets* is what Washington does. But because NCLB contains incentives for perverse behavior, reauthorization should include legislation empowering states to ignore it. (*Getting Past No Child*, The Denver Post, Editorial Page, B07, December 9, 2007).

### Education Reform as “Gutting” the Educational System

There was considerable discussion of “gutting” the educational system and about policymakers having the “guts” to take on more radical education reforms. The following are just a few examples:

Rep. Peter Hoekstra ... believes the reauthorized version of NCLB will *gut* accountability. He is gloomily sanguine about that because he thinks accountability belongs at the local level anyway and because removing meaningful accountability removes NCLB’s *raison d’être*. He proposes giving states the option of submitting to Washington a “Declaration of Intent” to reclaim full responsibility for K-12 education. Such states would receive their portion of K-12 funds as block grants. (*Getting Past No Child*, The Denver Post, Editorial Page, B07, December 9, 2007.)

In her efforts to revitalize the teaching ranks, Rhee has challenged the long-standing power of teachers unions ... “She was taking sides on an issue that she thought was important to schools and education reform, and it took some *guts* to do this,” said Dan Weisberg, executive director of labor policy with the New York City Department of Education ... “You knew she was teaching from the soul, getting down to the *gut* of it,” Carter said. “She was putting everything she had into it.” (*Fenty’s Agent of Change; Today, Michelle Rhee Must Convince the D.C. Council That She Has What it Takes to Turn Around One of the Nation’s Most Troubled School Systems*, The Washington Post, Metro, Pg. B01, July 2, 2007.)

Instead of pushing through reforms of teacher benefits, Michigan legislators are busy *gutting* programs that could help make the state’s classrooms among the best in the nation. The heralded new state high school curriculum reform is at risk of falling victim to funding cuts to solve the budget crisis. (*Timid Lawmakers Throw Students Under the Bus*, The Detroit News, Editorials, Pg. 16A, September 13, 2007.)

“This will not change the *guts* of No Child Left Behind accountability,” Spellings said during a conference call with reporters. “However, it gives states the opportunity to describe the range of schools that meet and do not meet in different ways.” Spellings plans to grant the leeway to as many as 10 states that submit pilot projects this spring. The programs would not require a change in law. (*THE NATION; White House Ready to Ease Its Stance on Failing Schools*, Los Angeles Times, Main News, National Desk, Editorials, part A, Pg. 15, March 19, 2008.)

House Bill 1133, specifically, would provide tax credits to businesses and individuals who contribute to scholarships for public school students wanting to attend private school. Contrary to the rhetoric of opponents of this legislation, a recent study by the Friedman Foundation shows that these scholarships could actually save local school systems \$94 million and the state \$6 million, thus increasing the amount of resources available to those students remaining in public school. This is the opposite of “*gutting*”. (*Tax Credits for Private-School Grants a Win-Win*, Atlanta-Journal Constitution, Editorials, Pg. 23A, March 19, 2008.)

The Education Trust and the Aspen Institute have thoughtful proposals to improve No Child Left Behind, not *gut* it. But so far, anyway, the Democrats who would be president are happy to propose more spending on education but are reluctant to impose any demands in return — in other words, they are happy to sound like the same old Democratic Party, permissive and beholden. (*From Barack Obama, Two Dangerous Words*, The Washington Post, Editorial Copy, Pg. A15, July 11, 2007.)

### **Education Reform Funding as Drought**

This chronic shorting of school funding has led to an increase in the number of students in our classrooms, a reduction of remedial programs and the largest tax increase in Georgia’s history as local school districts increased property taxes to try to keep our schools from totally falling apart. We have talked much in the last year about *the drought*. I suggest the greatest drought in our state is in education leadership. Georgia will never reach its potential until we have leaders who put education first and foremost each and every year. (*PERDUE VS. BARNES; The Right Road for Schools: For Success, Follow N.C.’s Proven Map*, Atlanta-Journal Constitution, @Issue, Pg. IE, June 1, 2008.)

### **CONCLUSIONS: GOING AGAINST THE GRAIN AND ENDING ON A POSITIVE NOTE**

There is a highly consistent core story of education reform that is currently operating in the U.S. media. Its tune is simple, catchy, and fits well with a wide set of existing cultural models that the public has to think about education. The lyrics go a little like this: America’s educational system

is broken; bad parents, unmotivated students and uncaring teachers are the cause of the breakdown but social problems like poverty, neglect and crime make matters worse; policymakers “downtown” are responsible for fixing it but because of limited resources and political in-fighting, they lack the capacity to move this issue forward meaningfully. Simple and catchy, indeed!

In addition to our more general goals of examining the patterns in the media presentation of education reform, in this cognitive media analysis we specifically sought to capture the systems-level discourse inherent in the media coverage of education. To do this we looked specifically at the media coverage crafted around systems and found that this coverage (separate from the education issue more generally) did strike a more thematic (rather than episodic) chord. We also found, however, that the potential of this systems-level discourse was muted by the media’s consistent reference to both endogenous and exogenous factors that hamper transformational efforts to reform education. When the presentation of efforts to reform education are confined to the success stories of individual schools or are buried in a barrage of factors that make their success seem impossible (before positive possibilities have had time to be properly digested and considered), the public can lose sight of both the potential and feasibility of reform efforts, and the necessity of moving forward with strong policy responses. Without coverage that frames education reform as a series of feasible policies that involve all citizens, education reform will continue to be a problem for the “downtown” crowd rather than a mission connected to the “success” and “failure” of all schools and all students.

In FrameWorks’ education reform focus group sessions, we found that the public was pessimistic about the possibility that education reforms could really transform educational institutions in ways that advanced the learning and development of our children. In those focus groups, it literally required placing participants in the role of education reformers to get them to think more constructively about education reform and to envision systems-levels reforms that have the potential to improve student outcomes. The findings from this cognitive media analysis put some of those focus group results in context and provide significant clues about why there is so much cynicism and negativity about education reform efforts. Indeed, the focus group participants can be seen as “good learners” of the media narratives to which they have been exposed in daily news doses.

While we do not claim that media elites collude in any way to consciously mitigate public expectations about education reform efforts, we do argue herein that the patterns inherent in the presentation of education reform issues do have this implicit effect. If education advocates are to be successful in putting forward a different set of frames to engage the public and in permeating existing types of coverage, they need to clearly understand the cultural narratives that both feed and are reinforced by media coverage, and better coordinate their efforts to shake up these

conventional ways of talking about education reform. Emphasizing that the political process is a challenge, but one that does not preclude creative, innovative and strategic action on education reform, is important. Presenting solutions as part of causal stories and emphasizing their possibilities for transformation — despite the political wrangling in local quarters — is likely to be an important part of the communications reframe as well.

The good news for advocates is that a substantial portion of the news media on education reform comes from “official sources” or from organizations that have communications officers and regularly put out press releases of important data, leadership changes and the like. This suggests a window through which to transform the media around reform. That is, to the extent that advocates can shape the thinking of communications officers in educational institutions, we are likely to see media coverage change as well.

Few of the articles about education reform ended with positive asides or were able to link school level impacts with larger structural forces — two requisite developments necessary to advance public policy level solutions to educational challenges. This is integral to the reframing challenge that we see on the issue of education reform. Only a few, like that of the editorial below, made the cognitive leap between what happens in the adjacent neighborhood, larger systemic forces and systems-level transformations.

This is no quick fix; the commission says it would take 15 years to put all the reforms in place. And the success of the reforms hinges on top-notch standards, assessments and curriculum, all of which take time to develop. Daunting as such changes may be, they’re vital if American students are to compete in the new global economy. (*Give Education a Shock of Excellence; Higher Salaries, Early Graduation Age Worth a Try to Boost Students, Teachers*, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Editorial Page, Pg. 14A, September 25, 2007.)

Another commentator seizes on another key part of the reframing challenge — presenting the complexity of the political process without allowing it to absorb the potential of the education reform solutions mentioned. In the quote, the author admonishes readers not to give up on education. What a fine way to face the reframing challenge!

In the past six months, something quiet yet significant has happened in this state’s education debate. For the first time in memory, education and political leaders have started shifting away from the usual “more money” mantra and talking in a more sophisticated way about which strategies work best to improve student learning. How to spend money wisely. How to assure taxpayers of results in exchange for greater investment. Don’t give up on education. The ideas are there, with or without a lot of cash. (*Is There Will to Help Schools*, Chicago Tribune, News, Zone C, Pg. 18, July 23, 2007.)



**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](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org).

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<sup>1</sup> Strategic Frame Analysis™ includes a variety of methods such as: cultural models interviews, focus groups, media content analysis, cognitive media content analysis, Simplifying Models development and empirical testing of frame effects using experimental surveys.

<sup>2</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>3</sup> Because the patterns in how people make sense of information are used both predictably in response to specific bits of information, and shared across individuals, research documenting these patterns illuminates how individuals interpret specific pieces of information. Furthermore, because exposure to the media is incessant and limited, people have a lot of practice “thinking” the narrow set of mental models that these messages activate. This most frequently activated sub-set of all the possible models that people have available becomes highly practiced, familiar and easy to think. In short because there is a relatively narrow and constant set of frames in the media, the cultural models that correspond to these frames become heavily engrained, deeply entrenched and easily activated. Exploring the shared cognitive structures that members of a culture use to derive meaning from stimuli is the basis for understanding what individuals “do” when presented with messages.

<sup>4</sup> Zuckerman, Mortimer, 2009. *Education Reform Consensus Grows on Fixing Urban Schools: The ground in the battle for school reform is beginning to change*. February 2, 2009, U.S. News & World Report.

<sup>5</sup> FrameWorks Institute, 2009. *Enough Blame to Go Around: A Focus Group Analysis of Education and Reform: A FrameWorks Research Report*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

<sup>6</sup> We should be clear here that it is “education reform” that is almost exclusively covered by local media. However, education as a general topical area is more widely covered by a variety of media outlets.

<sup>7</sup> See for example our focus group report (FrameWorks Institute, 2009. *Enough Blame to Go Around: A Focus Group Analysis of Education and Reform: A FrameWorks Research Report*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute) or our cultural models report (Hilary Chart and Nat Kendall-Taylor, 2008. *Reform What? Individualist Thinking in Education: American Cultural Models on Schooling: A FrameWorks Research Report*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Recall, though, that our search terms were quite broad (“education system,” “education reform” and “school reform”).

<sup>9</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>10</sup> Episodic news frames are those that typically focus on individual case studies and discrete events. In contrast, thematic news frames are those that apply a wide-angle lens to the coverage of the issue — focusing on trends over time, and highlighting contexts and environments. For a more detailed discussion see [http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/framebytes/framebyte\\_thematic.pdf](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/framebytes/framebyte_thematic.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> FrameWorks Institute, 2009. *Enough Blame to Go Around: A Focus Group Analysis of Education and Reform: A FrameWorks Research Report*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute. Hilary Chart and Nat Kendall-Taylor, 2008. *Reform What? Individualist Thinking in Education: American Cultural Models on Schooling: A FrameWorks Research Report*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

<sup>12</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>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> In particular, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 dramatically changed the frame by which we judge the success of welfare reform efforts. Rather than looking at the percentage of people in poverty or food insecurity, PRWORA gave incentives for states to examine, collect data around, and report data around job-holding among the poor and welfare “dependency.” In this way, the legislation changed the frame and the terms of the debate so that the public discourse was no longer about how to end poverty but how to end joblessness, among other new evaluation measures. Those issues are obviously connected but very different in terms of their implications for policy.

<sup>15</sup> Schram, Sanford and Joe Soss, 2001. “Success Stories: Welfare Reform, Policy Discourse, and the Politics of Research.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 577, No. 1, pg. 51-52.

<sup>16</sup> This is true even though we acknowledge that many states had been moving to standardized testing even before the passage of the NCLB legislation.

<sup>17</sup> No Child Left Behind of 2001 requires all public schools to administer a state-wide standardized test annually to all students. Schools which receive Title I funding must make Adequate Yearly Progress in test scores (e.g., each year, its fifth graders must do better on standardized tests than the previous years). If a Title I school fails to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), it is put on a list of “failing schools” published in the local paper and parents are given the option to transfer to another school. If it does not meet AYP for a second year, then it must provide special tutoring for its economically disadvantaged students.

<sup>18</sup> Schram, Sanford and Joe Soss, 2001. “Success Stories: Welfare Reform, Policy Discourse, and the Politics of Research.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 577, No. 1, pg. 60.

<sup>19</sup> See Hilary Chart and Nat Kendall-Taylor, 2008. *Reform What? Individualist Thinking in Education: American Cultural Models on Schooling: A FrameWorks Research Report*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute, or FrameWorks Institute, 2009. *Enough Blame to Go Around: A Focus Group Analysis of Education and Reform: A FrameWorks Research Report*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

<sup>20</sup> Schram and Soss make a similar point in their analysis of welfare reform. Welfare reform required a “reporting out” of key evaluation measures that would form the basis of subsequent rounds of institutional funding and policy allocations. Thus, the data from the evaluation measures were literally “wrapped around” a host of important incentives, making them newsworthy and important as independent points of information for public dissemination. This, in turn, comprised a “news hook” that could be reliably and easily reported.

<sup>21</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, pg. 19.

<sup>22</sup> Although one could imagine that the dissemination of the test scores could be used by active and engaged parents to try to press educational reforms of their choosing on school leadership, these data are generally so narrowly circumscribed that parental advocacy emerging from them would likely be fairly limited as well.

<sup>23</sup> Frank Gilliam, Jr., 2008. *Effects of Explicitness in the Framing of Race*. Washington, DC.: FrameWorks Institute.

<sup>24</sup> See also See our FrameByte, “Using Causal Chains,”

[http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/framebytes/framebyte\\_causal\\_sequences.pdf](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/framebytes/framebyte_causal_sequences.pdf)

Or view our webinar, “Making Connections with Causal Chains,”

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

<sup>25</sup> Although opinion pieces (in the print media) often had the chance to float policy proposals without the negative overtones generally reflected in lengthier feature stories.

<sup>26</sup> See Susan Nall Bales, 2006. *How to Talk About Government: A FrameWorks Message Memo*. FrameWorks Institute and some of our other government related research. <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/government.html>

<sup>27</sup> This is true even after we accounted for news syndication where news articles and editorials are distributed throughout networks of news outlets.

<sup>28</sup> Center for Media and Public Affairs, 2009. *Put Down Your Pencils Please: Media Coverage of Education Reform 2007 to 2008*. Washington, DC...: FrameWorks Institute, pg. 8.

<sup>29</sup> For a more substantive discussion of how to avoid cueing up the crisis flag, see for example [http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/framebytes/FrameByte\\_economy\\_02%2009\\_final.pdf](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/framebytes/FrameByte_economy_02%2009_final.pdf)

<sup>30</sup> For a more substantive discussion about metaphors as part of the frame, see FrameByte, “Creating and Using Metaphors,” here: [http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/framebytes/framebyte\\_hc\\_metaphors.pdf](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/framebytes/framebyte_hc_metaphors.pdf) Our eZine, “Can’t I just invent my own metaphors? Why Research Matters in Developing Metaphorical Models,” <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/ezine37.html>. Or view our webinar, “Simplifying Models: What they do, Why they matter, and Where they come from”: <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/webinars.html>