



Reform What?
Individualist Thinking in Education:
American Cultural Models on Schooling

A FrameWorks Research Report

prepared for the FrameWorks Institute
by
Hilary Chart
with Nat Kendall-Taylor

September 2008

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	3
SUMMARY.....	4
Individualist Thinking about Education	
Other Important Themes	
General Implications	
RESEARCH METHOD.....	6
Subjects	
Interviews	
Analysis	
EMERGENT INDIVIDUALIST MODELS.....	7
I. The Purpose of Education.....	8
<u>Dominant Model: Education Serves Individuals</u>	
<i>Education Serves Individuals Model</i>	
<u>Recessive Models: Some Social Purposes</u>	
1. <i>Education to Relieve Pressure on the System Model</i>	
2. <i>Education as Investment in Our Future Model</i>	
3. <i>Education to Produce Leaders & Innovators Model</i>	
4. <i>Education for International Status Model</i>	
5. <i>Diversity to Successfully Manage Diversity Model</i>	
<u>Implications of Individualist Purposes of Educations</u>	
<i>What's Missing</i>	
1. <i>Awareness of Collective Benefits of Education</i>	
<i>Policy Implication</i>	
1. <i>Difficulty Conceptualizing Reforms Aimed at Collective Benefits</i>	
II. Responsibility for Educational Outcomes.....	13
<u>Dominant Models: Individuals (and Parents) are Responsible for Educational Outcomes</u>	
1. <i>Mentalist Model</i>	
2. <i>The Little-Picture, Family-Bubble Model</i>	
3. <i>Kids Have Different Starting Points Model</i>	
<u>Recessive Models: Responsibility to Provide Equal Opportunity</u>	
1. <i>“Minimum Equal Opportunity” Model</i>	
2. <i>Achievement for All Model</i>	

Implications

What’s Missing

- 1. Responsibility of Schools for Failures
- 2. Community Influences

Policy Implications:

- 1. Difficulty Identifying the Source of Change
- 2. Student & Parent Engagement Make Sense are Limiting
- 3. Difficulty Conceptualizing School Accountability

III. The Site of Education.....20

Dominant Models: Education Happens through Individual Interactions with Teachers

- 1. Teacher Quality is School Quality Model
- 2. Teacher Accountability Model

Recessive Models: Thinking Beyond Interactions with Teachers

- 1. Broad Ecological Model
- 2. School Structures Model

Implications

What’s Missing

- 1. Influence of Ecological Factors, including School Organization and Policy
- 2. Importance of Teacher Training

Policy Implications

- 1. Teacher Accountability Makes Sense, but Training & Proficiency is Hard to Think
- 2. Smaller Classes Make Sense
- 3. Restructuring Public Education is Hard to Think

ADDITIONAL MODELS.....25

Preschool is Exclusively for Social Learning Model.....25

Consumerist Models.....26

- 1. Schools Should be Run Like Businesses Model
- 2. Paying is Motivating Model
- 3. Weighing Costs and Benefits of Higher Education Model

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS.....29

CONCLUSION.....30

INTRODUCTION

The research presented here constitutes the first phase of a two-year investigation into how Americans think about education, sponsored by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation and the Lumina Foundation for Education. This report explores the ways in which involved citizens in New England and southern California talk about and understand education in America.

The purpose of the larger two-year research project is to better understand dominant ways of thinking and talking about education. In subsequent research, we will continue to examine how these cultural patterns affect educational reform efforts. A second related goal is to explore ways to improve the public's understanding of education and reform and facilitate a perspective that clarifies and emphasizes the role that policy must play in educational improvement.

In this first phase of the research, interviews were conducted to identify the relevant cognitive and cultural patterns that shape Americans' thinking about educational issues. In these interviews, FrameWorks was looking not for the "what," but rather the "how"—in other words, not the specific content of opinions, but the underlying patterns of thinking that characterize people's understandings. This approach is based on principles and data-gathering methods adapted over the last ten years from the fields of cognitive anthropology and cognitive linguistics. The resulting report offers a preliminary "map" of the most relevant cognitive/cultural models that guide Americans' thinking on education, and serves as a foundation for subsequent research in new sites and efforts to reframe issues of education and educational reform.

The findings presented in this report are organized into three sections by theme: I) The Purpose of Education, II) Responsibility for Educational Outcomes, and III) The Site of Education. Within each of these sections, primary patterns of thinking, or "dominant models," are first presented. In addition to these dominant cultural patterns of thought, a number of less pervasive ways of talking and thinking also emerged from analysis. These "recessive models" are presented following the more dominant models in each section. Next, within each themed section, implications are discussed in two subsections covering patterns of thinking that were conspicuously absent in the interviews, and specific policy implications. Two other themes, not directly individualist, are then presented, followed by a discussion of the implications of these findings. The report closes with a brief summary of major findings and concluding remarks.

SUMMARY

This section describes the primary findings from of the cognitive interview research and summarizes general implications.

Individualist Thinking about Education

Informants overwhelmingly thought about education in terms of *individuals* and had difficulty thinking about schooling and learning at a systemic level. Interviews were characterized by three dominant individualist themes.

1. The Purpose of Education: Education Serves Individuals.

The benefits of education are seen to accrue to *individuals* in the form of being a successful adult: getting by in the adult world, getting a good job, and getting along with others. Education is seen as a foundation that prepares students to become proficient and successful adults. Thinking about and recognizing the social and collective benefits of education was conspicuously absent from the interview data. Collective thinking, or the “publicness” of a social problem, is a necessary prerequisite to shift public thinking towards policy solutions that require public action and funding. If issues are conceptualized in terms of individuals, there is no role or room for social policy.

2. Responsibility for Educational Outcomes: Individuals (Parents) are Responsible for Educational Outcomes.

Informants were quick to explain disparities in individual and school outcomes in terms of individual student and/or family traits, behaviors and choices. Informants therefore had difficulty attributing responsibility for educational outcomes to schools or the educational system more broadly. According to informants, it was clear that parents and families, not schools, are to blame for educational failures. When informants *did* hold schools accountable, the schools’ responsibility was to ensure equal *opportunity* to a basic or minimum level of education, not equality of outcomes. There was an overall reluctance to hold schools accountable for much of anything, and informants paid little attention to reforms aimed at improving schools or educational system without first addressing parents and home life.

3. The Site of Education: Education Happens through Individual Interactions.

When pressed to think about out-of-home influences on student achievement, informants identified the importance of teachers’ influence on student and school achievement. The importance of teachers is consistent with the dominant individualist focus that characterized much of the interview data. Teachers were seen as having the ability to motivate students and informants saw teacher caring as a particularly important trait. For a majority of informants, the focus on caring teachers being good teachers overwhelmed, overshadowed, and obscured the importance of teacher

knowledge and training, characteristics that were not frequently connected with being a “good teacher.” Also missing from the interviews were discussions and explanations of the importance of school leadership, organizations, and other factors related to the school setting and environment.

Other Important Themes

Beyond these obviously individualist perspectives, two other important themes emerged from analysis.

1. *Preschool attendance has “social” benefits, but does little else.*

Informants emphasized the value of preschool in helping children learn to get along with others and interact with non-parental authority figures. However, there was little discussion of the importance of other skills or developments that specialists believe preschool is integral in facilitating. Furthermore, many informants saw the social skills conferred through preschool attendance as being “natural” or automatic and not necessarily requiring preschool enrollment. These beliefs lead many to see preschool as relatively superfluous and several informants went so far as to refer to preschool as “just babysitting.”

2. *Consumerist Models are Used to think about Education.*

Informants frequently employed consumerist cultural models to think about education. The tendency to see schools as consumer-driven institutions pits efficiency and bottom line thinking against the social purposes of education and makes collective benefits difficult for the public to conceptualize. Models that exclude consideration of education for society are problematic and leave little room to think about the necessity of public policy in reforming our education system.

General Implications

Findings from the cognitive interviews suggest that there is considerable work to do in reframing how Americans think about and understand the education system—important preconditions before reforms become “thinkable.” Findings highlight the importance of carefully reframing issues of reform. Only by changing the public dialogue to more fully consider a range of interacting systems can reformers shift dominant patterns of thinking to garner public support for education reform policies.

By working along the grain of dominant individualist thinking, reformers run the risk of further entrenching cultural models that interfere with the systemic changes that education reformers wish to affect.

Consequently, reformers need to put considerable effort toward providing the public with new models for how to think about education—models that make reform vivid, concrete and compelling.

RESEARCH METHOD

Findings are based on 49 in-depth interviews with Americans in New England (Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Rhode Island) and southern California conducted by two FrameWorks Institute researchers in June and July of 2008.

Subjects

Informants were recruited by a professional marketing firm through a screening process used in most FrameWorks research. In each state, a pool of 10 informants was selected¹ to represent variation along domains of ethnicity, gender, age, educational background, and political ideology (as self-reported during the screening process). Based on previous FrameWorks research findings and those in the cultural models literature more generally the sample was particularly sensitive to capturing variation in educational attainment.

Efforts were made to recruit a broad range of informants. However, the interview sample should not be considered representative of all Americans. The strength of these interviews and the data they produce rests in their power to reveal patterns of thinking and cultural models that Americans commonly and repeatedly use in talking and thinking about education. Future stages of this research will employ quantitative methods designed specifically to gauge the representativeness of our findings, as part of FrameWorks' multi-method iterative process of analysis.

Because our interview research was focused on ways people talk and think about education, it was important to recruit informants whom we had reason to believe *do* talk and think about education. To ensure that our participants were engaged and were likely to have opinions about education without priming by explicitly raising the topic prior to interviews, our screening procedure was designed to select informants who reported a strong interest in current events and active involvement in their communities. These criteria were constant for both the high and low education samples.

Interviews

Informants participated in one-on-one, semi-structured “cognitive interviews” lasting between one and two hours. In line with the cognitive interview methodology commonly applied in psychological anthropology, interviews were designed to elicit ways of thinking and talking about topics related to education. As the goal of these interviews is

¹ In Rhode Island, due to a last minute no-show, we were only able to interview nine of the selected 10 individuals.

to examine the cultural models informants use to make sense of and understand an issue, a key to this methodology is giving informants the freedom to follow topics in the directions they deem relevant. Therefore, the interviewers approached each interview with a set of topics to be covered; the order in which these topics were covered was left largely to the informant. Put another way, researchers were able to follow the informants' train of thought, rather than interrupting to follow a pre-established course of questions. Among the topics discussed in each interview were the purpose of education, important components of the education system, the quality of schooling today, influences on educational outcomes, and ideas for improving schooling. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Quotes are provided in the report to illustrate major points but identifying information has been excluded to ensure informant confidentiality.

Analysis

Analytical techniques employed in cognitive and linguistic anthropology were adapted to examine how informants understand education. As part of this inquiry, FrameWorks re-examined and updated its method of cognitive interviewing to align more closely with the scholarly work in the field. Dr. Claudia Strauss, a cognitive anthropologist and expert in social discourse analysis, was an advisor on this project. Elements of social discourse analysis were applied to identify larger cultural models. First, common *discourses*, or ways of talking, were identified. These were frequently elaborate and interconnected, and often revealed an underlying organizational set of assumptions and connections people make and use when thinking about a topic. Anthropologists refer to these patterns of tacit understandings and assumptions as cultural models.

EMERGENT INDIVIDUALIST MODELS

The central finding of this research is that education is most readily and frequently conceptualized and discussed at the individual level. This broad pattern of individualist thinking is comprised of three more specific themes:

1. The purpose of education is to *serve* individuals.
2. Individuals and their families are *responsible* for educational outcomes, both successes and failures.
3. Learning occurs through individual *interactions* with teachers.

From a reform perspective, these three themes present unique challenges for engaging the public in systems-level policies. In other words, focusing on individualist purposes, responsibility, and interactions diverts attention and crowds out those aspects of education that identify it as a public issue: the collective good, institutional responsibility, and policy-level changes. Before people can be engaged around broad reforms to benefit the public through institutional improvement, they must be able to think about education as more than just a field of unconnected individuals and individual interactions.

Informants were able to think and talk in more collective terms at times, especially when explicitly asked to think about larger purposes and influences. These models are important to note and may represent entry-points to engage alternative ways of

conceptualizing education. However, these more social ways of understanding education were clearly secondary, and are accordingly presented as “recessive models” here.

This section proceeds by detailing the dominant individualist models employed by informants and then presents recessive ways of thinking that appear promising in extending thinking beyond the individual. The limitations of these models are then discussed and broader policy implications presented.

I. The Purpose of Education

Dominant Model: Education Serves Individuals

When asked about the purposes of education, the vast majority of informants focused narrowly on individual benefits of education.

I think [education] is important to get ahead in life. I think that's the most important thing to be successful. It's very competitive out there.

White Conservative Man, age 56, Massachusetts

Informant: ...*They're dropping out early, and then they're realizing that you're not going to get anywhere. You got to get an education.*

Interviewer: ...*What purposes does education serve?*

Informant: *Of everything. Better life, better job, everything. But the thing is, that message is not getting to those kids. You see, education is there, and it's for a purpose. And education serves a lot in your life.*

Hispanic-American Liberal Woman, age 30-35, Rhode Island

The most commonly used model for thinking about the purpose of education, employed by over half of the informants, was that *education is a foundation that prepares young people to become successful adults*. Specifically, it prepares them to get jobs, have the basic skills to function in the “real world,” and to interact effectively in social situations.

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

White Liberal Woman, age 29, California

I have to admit, I mean, the more education, you have a better chance of getting a better job.

White Independent Man, age 35, Massachusetts

[Speaking about purposes and benefits of education] *Definitely the verbal, both the spoken and written words, are extremely important... Because it's so hard to get hired in any job with a future now unless you can communicate well with others and be promotable.*

Asian-American Liberal Man, age 44, California

I think you need an education to get by in the world... To get along, get a good job, just even getting along with people, you know?... A good education also gives you some social skills, conversational skills.

White Independent Woman, age 60-69, New Hampshire

Recessive Models: Some Social Purposes

A few informants talked about purposes of education other than just preparing individuals to get by, get jobs and get along. However, models capturing these larger purposes of education were typically discussed secondarily or only when researchers specifically probed for them (i.e. “Can you think of any social purposes of education?” or “Why do we use tax money for education?”). The following models emerged when people were asked to think about social purposes of education. The promise of these secondary models will be explored in future FrameWorks research designed to explore ways to reframe the public’s understanding of educational reform.

1. Education to Relieve Pressure on the System Model

Approximately one quarter of informants mentioned the importance of attaining self-sufficiency through education in order to avoid dependency on government programs (a clearly individualist purpose of education in line with the dominant model discussed above), but also to relieve pressure on the social welfare system. This interdependence may sound like a promising sentiment to employ to gain traction for reform policies. However, it is imperative to note that the only type of interdependence informants could conceptualize was negative. In other words, informants could readily see how public supports were a drain on collective resources because of the interdependent nature of our system—a clear negative perception of interdependence. However, informants lacked a dominant model through which to conceptualize the positive aspects of interdependence, for example, how because of our interdependence, devoting collective resources to education benefits us all.

[Discussing social purposes of education] *Well, to be a productive citizen... Someone who is first of all independent and self-sufficient, so they can take care of themselves, so they're not a burden on society.*

African-American Liberal Man, age 60-69, Connecticut

2. Education as Investment in Our Future Model

The “investment in our future” model of education appeared to focus on collective purposes of education, but was highly incomplete in most cases. For the informants who used this model, only about a quarter of the total sample, there was only a vague conception of a shared “future” that education helps to create, and not one informant was able to specify how education eventually affects society as a whole. In addition to being recessive, this model was poorly formed and incoherently expressed.

Interviewer: *What do you see as the purpose of education?*

Informant: *I say it's for our future really. I mean, I look at teachers as they're shaping our future. So, it really is like the next generation for us... where we're going.*

White Independent Woman, age 30-39, Massachusetts

3. Education to Produce Leaders/Innovators Model

Although informants generally focused on the benefits of education for individuals, they were able to see some individual successes as beneficial for all. Roughly a fifth of informants employed a cultural model that emphasized schools' importance for producing leaders and future innovators and the benefit of these individuals for “society.” While the idea of “education producing leaders” appears to be related to the above point about “education as investment in the future,” these two models were distinct in important ways and informants did not connect the two. In other words, some said education was a way of investing in our society's future, and some said that education benefits society by producing leaders, but producing leaders was never described as a way of investing in our future. This lack of integration is further evidence of the partial and secondary nature of these more social models for thinking about education.

Well, if there was no education, who would be president? [LAUGHS] This world would be a mess... I don't even want to think about it.

White Conservative Woman, age 56, Connecticut

I think the purpose is clear: the youth of today will be running this country.

African-American Liberal Woman, age 59, Connecticut

Interviewer: *So why do you think our tax money goes towards education?*

Informant: *Well, they are the future of the country. And, you know our taxes go to educate the kids so they can be better prepared for the future. Some of these guys here are going to be our future Einsteins or whatever you want to call it. I mean they're going to be the one who discovered a cure.*

Asian-American Liberal Man, age 44, California

4. Education for International Status Model

In this model, the United States is engaged in global competition with other nations (particularly Japan). About a quarter of informants emphasized the importance of education as a global status symbol or as a means of improving our position on the global dominance ladder. However, there was no connection between this global competition concept and the social welfare of Americans. In other words, education in this global model was purely a status symbol.

We're not a third world country. We need to raise that level of education and it just kind of raises the whole country to a level. You know, for power and everything. It just gives us all that.

White Liberal Man, age 49, Connecticut

The main purpose [of education]? ... To make sure our country stays strong... I think we need to on top of our game, you know. Other countries seem to be moving ahead in a lot of areas. I don't think it should be as strict as Japan, for instance or that the kids don't get a break, but we do need to be really, you know, on top of our game.

White Independent Woman, age 40-49, New Hampshire

5. Diversity to Successfully Manage Diversity Model

Approximately one fifth of the informants mentioned the importance of diversity in schools. Informants emphasized the importance of classroom diversity in teaching students how to “deal” with different types of people. Informants overwhelmingly understood the value of diversity in individualist terms. Diversity in schools was seen as another tool for creating successful individual adults who could respond well in “diversity situations.” There was no sense of classroom diversity as a means of broadening horizons, understanding other groups, or of confronting stereotypes. The level at which informants thought about diversity was shallow and conformed to the more general model that defined the purposes of education as being just about individuals getting ahead and being successful. Therefore, while a model used to conceptualize diversity in education may appear promising for social policy, the model evident in our interview data is merely an iteration of the dominant “education serves individuals” model described above. In this highly individualist model, diversity functions to prepare individuals for the diversity they will encounter later in life, and is seen as another way that education prepares children to be successful individuals when they grow up. This model of diversity is all about individuals and individual purposes and contains no structural or systemic features.

...in any type of educational setting whether it be a school...um...take art class, take a personal growth class, students intermixed with other people, other cultures. ... Like I thought if I didn't, you know, go through schooling or if I was just home schooled I wouldn't have had those experiences. And as I got older and I came across new experiences it might have been more of a shock or-or more difficult...

White Liberal Woman, age 29, California

[Talking about important elements of the school system] *Diversity in the school...even though they're not the same color or don't have the same background as you, you have to live with them. And you have to coexist.*

White Independent Man, age 56, Massachusetts

Implications of Individualist Purposes of Educations

What's Missing: Awareness of Collective Benefits of Education

Despite the existence of some recessive models with more social elements, the primary collective benefits of education -- such as having a healthier population, reducing crime, and strengthening the economy -- are conspicuously absent when individuals employ the dominant cultural model of *education as individual preparation for adulthood*. Furthermore, this individualist model for understanding the purposes of education obscures the public's role in improving and reforming education.

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

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

White Conservative Woman, age 56, Connecticut

Policy Implication

Difficulty Conceptualizing Reforms Aimed at Collective Benefits

Findings show that, while there are many common ways to think and talk about education as preparation for adulthood, models of collective societal benefits of schooling are secondary, partial, and lack integration. Furthermore, the one recessive model used to understand diversity is actually just a more specific iteration of the dominant Education for Individual Preparation model. This suggests that American culture lacks a strong cultural model through which individuals can understand education's more social purposes. While informants were able to generate ideas about producing leaders and

international competition, there was little elaboration on how education contributed to these and typically only secondary importance was given to these purposes of education. This is not to say that informants are selfish in their thinking about education. We do *not* claim that this is a moral problem, rather that informants lack a dominant, well-formed, and coherent cultural model for understanding these more social purposes of education. Moreover, thinking about individuals and their educational outcomes does not add up to a collective societal perspective on educational benefits. In short, individuals think individualistically when they think about education, so individuals and individualist solutions are all they see. From the perspective of most reformers, this individualist focus presents a significant challenge. Reform efforts appealing to collective benefits and aimed at improving social welfare through education are likely to fall flat and lack resonance with a public that does not readily connect schooling with broader social welfare. Reformers and policy-makers must work to provide the link between education and collective benefits in order to engage the public in publically financed reforms.

II. Responsibility for Educational Outcomes

Dominant Models: Individuals (Parents) are Responsible for Educational Outcomes

The most pervasive individualist finding from our research was that individuals, mainly parents, are responsible both for the failures and successes of education. When asked about influences on student and school achievement, almost every informant defaulted to a cultural model in which individuals determine and are primarily responsible for educational outcomes. While this is an incredibly powerful finding for reformers and the policy community more generally, it is not without precedent. Past FrameWorks research on community health as well as on youth and education has underscored the importance of addressing individual responsibility as an American value, and found evidence of a pervasive cultural model in which a wide range of phenomena are caused by parental and family factors. Typically, when the idea of educational outcomes was evoked, informants immediately identified parents as the responsible party. As in several examples below, informants were reluctant to assign responsibility for student failure to schools because this was seen to excuse individual (student and parent) responsibility, and evoke an idea of excessive dependence on the government (in the form of schools).

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

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

White Liberal Woman, age 54, Massachusetts

[Explaining why some students succeed and other do not] *Individual variation... Individual variation. ...and family background. Yeah. People who live in*

culturally deprived homes or whose parents just are not readers, or whose parents, they- the students go home and listen to the parents bitch about this, you know, uh...being screwed by the government every day, they're going to pick that up and they're probably going to figure that it's not worth it to them to invest themselves in such a system.

White Conservative Man, age 54, California

1. Mentalist Model

As identified by FrameWorks in other issue areas, a mentalist model attributing problems to individuals' thinking or motivation was employed by over half of the informants. According to this model, outcomes are caused by and attributed to an individual's internal problems -- such as a lack of motivation, drive, or caring. Problems with students and schools were attributed to the absence of personal motivation that characterizes "kids today," which was in turn attributed to a lack of caring on the part of parents.

[Talking about why some students don't succeed] ...*What if I have a child that's lazy? She doesn't want to learn. What if she says 'You know what? This is fine, but it's bogus, I don't want to.'* You know? *It could be that mindset.*

White Liberal Woman, age 37, Connecticut

Interviewer: *Do you feel like schools are failing those [inner city kids]?*

Informant: *Down [in] the city? I think the kids just don't want to learn and they don't want to listen to authority.*

White Conservative Woman, age 56, Connecticut

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

White Conservative Woman, age 55, California

2. The Little-Picture, Family-Bubble Model

Poor parenting and disruptive family lives were also dominant causal factors in explanations of educational problems. Informants explained that the system doesn't work due to lack of parental support and caring which, in turn, leads to students' lack of caring and the failures of motivation described above. In this sense, the little-picture, family-bubble model should be seen as "nested" in the mentalist model.² In other words, people

² The term "nested" is used in the literature on cultural models to explain how a number of specific models may be situated or fit into a smaller set of broader foundational cultural models. In terms of the mentalist and family bubble models discussed here, the

use both models in thinking about educational outcomes with the mentalist model being further expanded and more specifically elaborated by the family-bubble model.

Interviewer: *What are the things that most influence whether kids do well?*

Informant: *Parents. Yep. If the parents are interested and make it important, kids are going to understand that. If the parents aren't involved and don't really care so much about what's going on at school, they don't question them or ask about it, the kids are going to pick up on that pretty quickly and decide it's not an important thing.*

White Conservative Man, age 30-39, New Hampshire

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

African-American Liberal Man, age 34, Massachusetts

Every time my daughter comes home from school, I don't care what day, if it's Friday, "Got any homework? How was your day at school? Do you need any help?" I mean, you got to ask them questions... And so parents can't put all the responsibility on the school too. You got parents who got to take responsibility for their own action.

African-American Liberal Man, age 35, Connecticut

Interviewer: *So why do some students do well and some students maybe don't?*

Informant: *Parents being involved in their kids' studies. I think there's just a real, real big parallel there with kids being successful in their studies and their grades and all when they've got parents who give a damn. There are so many parents out there who just go 'oh well that's the teacher's job.'*

White Somewhat Liberal Man, age 55, California

3. Kids Have Different Starting Points Model

mentalist model is a broad cultural model used to think about a wide range of subjects and issues in this country. When individuals use this mentalist model to think about certain subjects, for example education, they also make use of the more specific family bubble cultural model to make sense of the issue. For this reason, we say that the family bubble model is *nested* within the broader, more general and foundational mentalist model of education in American culture.

Related to the family-bubble model is another model that participants used to integrate thinking about the role of the parent and that of the school. This model employs the analogy of “starting points” from which students enter the education system. These starting points, according to the model, explain why some students do well and others don’t. Furthermore, the starting points are almost entirely determined by the home environment, which is shaped and constructed by parents. Since it is ultimately the point from which students enter education, or their starting point, that determines their eventual success, the logical conclusion is that parents are fundamentally responsible for the differences in educational outcomes.

It starts at home. If a child has been coming to school with holes in their shoe and haven’t ate, that’s certainly going to have an impact on that child’s ability to absorb whatever information or knowledge that’s there for them.

African-American Very Liberal Man, age 60-69, Rhode Island

You can throw all the money down in the world, but if the kid is going home at night and is hungry, how in gracious name is he going to come [to school] in the morning and be functional? And the same goes for, you know, older kids taking care of younger kids. How do they get their homework done? ... You can’t work hungry.

White Very Liberal Woman, age 46-55, Rhode Island

I mean if [a kid] had to sleep on the front porch because dad was out partying all night, he’s not going to do well at a 7:40 AM class. He’s going to fall asleep. And, you know... if he has to beat up other kids for lunch money he’s not going to take his hat off in class, I mean no. He’s starting from really low. He’s not starting at a point where he knows how to say ‘thank you’ and ‘please’ and, you know, that it’s not okay to wear a hat in class.

Asian-American Very Liberal Woman, age 43, California

I think parents have to... [LONG PAUSE] I think they have to be able to provide a quiet household at times and I think that’s really important... Because very few [kids] are looking long term... So parents, I think, have to get that through a kid’s head because a teacher is only there for a year in that one subject, but the parents are there every year... If parents don’t say you have to learn how to think, I think it’s a disaster.

White Independent Man, age 37, California

Recessive Models: Responsibility to Provide Equal Opportunity

Although informants spoke most readily about the responsibility of individuals and families for educational outcomes, a number of informants mentioned that schools should provide equal opportunity to gain a basic education. Two related models emerged, both of which are promising in their ability to frame the responsibility of schools and the educational system for educational outcomes. Further research will explore the promise of these recessive models.

1. “Minimum Equal Opportunity” Model

Slightly more than a fifth of informants thought that schools did have some responsibility to provide the minimum educational basics to ensure “equal opportunity.” According to this model, everyone should have an equal opportunity to gain the most basic educational skills³. Informants then defaulted to more individualist models in explaining that whether or not students take advantage of this opportunity depends on the individual students and their families.

I think it is necessary for the government to spend the money on education to provide an equal opportunity for every kid to grow up, at least to get the minimum or at least what education they can get, all right?

Asian Independent Woman, age 57, Massachusetts

But... if you don't fund public education, the society that you're creating is tiered and doesn't provide opportunities across the board. You would miss the opportunity to educate every child at least to some sort of minimal, functional level... We need to know that education meets a minimum standard across the board.

White Very Liberal Woman, age 46-55, Rhode Island

Informant: *Everyone deserves to have the chance to have a good education.*

Interviewer: *...Why do you add the word “chance” into that sentence... rather than all deserve a good education?*

Informant: *Because... It's still up to the student to take advantage of that. It's up to the family to support the student, you know, in order to push them.*

White Independent (leans D) Man, age 30-35, Connecticut

³ A minimum standard of *outcomes* is not necessarily the same as a minimum standard of opportunities. However, informants did not maintain this distinction. Perhaps this reveals the greater emphasis that has traditionally been placed on gaps in outcomes over those in opportunity.

You all have an equal opportunity, but there's no guaranteed success. Success is going to depend on how hard you work or whether what product or service you're providing, people want and need. It's not going to be guaranteed. Nothing's guaranteed. ...I think [some public school teachers] tend to think that fairness, or teach that fairness is equality in outcomes rather than the equality in opportunities.

White Somewhat Conservative Man, age 30-39, New Hampshire

2. Achievement for All Model

A very small number of informants supported the idea that equal opportunity does not mean only the most basic education, but rather that schools should ensure that every student attains high achievement, whatever extra effort that demands, regardless of a student's background or starting point⁴.

[Talking about schools who don't reach out to involve parents] I see that as a failure of school 'cause if you see this kid still acting up and you try and call their parents and nothing happen, - take the next step. But nobody wants to be responsible... Nobody want to be responsible to take the next step. You know what I mean? And that's the problem with school. Responsibility, it comes from the teacher too. I mean, don't just give up on them, just like, 'Whatever, he's a bad seed anyway. He's going to end up in jail or whatever.'

African-American Liberal Man, age 35, Connecticut

I mean, you have students from so many different backgrounds now, different economic backgrounds, from different countries. And kids learn different ways... and teachers and administrators need to be open to that. Not everybody learns the same way. And, you know, if you can't figure out a way that a student learns, they're not going to learn.... Then you don't get a level playing field... Everybody should be given an opportunity. That shouldn't just be based on your economic background and your color. It needs to be across the board. But that will never happen. All of this stuff will never happen.

White Liberal Woman, age 46-55, Rhode Island

⁴ Many informants misunderstood No Child Left Behind policies, and assumed these policies supported promotion of low-achieving students to the next grade (social-promotion).

This is why I'm not for No Child Left Behind. I think the kids get promoted, even though they don't know the grade material.

White Conservative Man, age 65, Connecticut

[Talking about reasons kids drop out] *They are bored. They are not inspired... and somehow a lot of school systems take the position that if kids aren't learning, it's the kids' fault... and, you know, it's the role of the school and the teachers to figure out a way to help these kids learn. If they aren't, why aren't they? And what do we need to do to help them? And I think making education relevant. So that they can see the value of it.*

African-American Liberal Man, age 60-69, Connecticut

Implications: What Individual/Family Responsibility Means

What's Missing: Responsibility of Anyone Other than Students & Parents

Although recessive models relating to equal opportunity are evident, informants most readily assigned responsibility for educational outcomes to students and, even more often, to their parents. Focusing responsibility at this individualist level obscures other factors that influence educational outcomes.

1. Responsibility of Schools for Failures

Despite the tradition of public education in America, citizens are hesitant to hold the educational system responsible for much at all, and explain differences in individual and even school outcomes using individual and family factors. While all informants placed a high value on education, they seemed unwilling to afford responsibility to schools. In the few cases where a school's responsibility for outcomes was recognized, it was only after the primary importance of student and parental behavior, motivation, and caring had been fully acknowledged. Informants were able to talk about what good schools look like, and particularly what good teachers are like, but typically only after talking about families or when pressed to think more specifically about in-school influences on educational outcomes. Furthermore, even when informants acknowledged the influence of in-school factors, they were reluctant to assign responsibility to these factors.

2. Community Influence

The role of communities in educational outcomes was rarely mentioned. In less than a handful of cases, informants were able to shift perspective between the (nuclear) family and the school. There was almost no discussion of the role of the community in supporting schools and education.

Policy Implications:

1. Difficulty Identifying the Sources of Change

Informants had a limited idea of who can and should make educational changes. This confusion makes calling for changes other than improving student and family motivation particularly difficult.

2. Student & Parent Engagement Make Sense but are Limiting

Reforms aimed at motivating students and engaging parents are likely to be consonant with cultural models held by the general public. However, aligning policy discourses with the dominant idea of individual responsibility is dangerous. Such an alignment reinforces ideas of student and parental responsibility and overshadows or even excludes consideration of school and systems culpability. Working within the dominant individualist model may ultimately undermine reform efforts.

3. Difficulty Conceptualizing School Accountability

Informants viewed parents as responsible for the education and success of young people and were reluctant to “excuse” individuals and families from this responsibility. Given the primacy of this model of individual responsibility here and as demonstrated in past FrameWorks research, this model may be difficult to change. Reformers need to focus on shifting the public discourse towards perspectives on educational disparities that overcome and diffuse the mentalist and family-bubble models that dominated our interviews. One possible way to achieve this shift is to focus on disparities in *opportunities* rather than disparities in *outcomes*.

III. The Site of Education

Dominant Models: Education Happens through Individual Interactions with Teachers

Informants were quick to hold individuals and families responsible for educational outcomes and reluctant to assign responsibility to schools. However, when asked about factors *within the education system* impacting learning, informants readily pointed out the importance of student/teacher interaction. Informants thought that school quality was directly determined by and equivalent to teacher quality. Teacher quality, in turn, was determined by the quality of individual interactions between teacher and student. Related to this, a lack of teacher accountability was seen as a major obstacle to school quality. Past FrameWorks research on community health has found striking parallels in which subjects focus on what is most easily visible on a human scale (here teachers rather than policies) and in so doing fail to recognize larger structural influences.

1. Teacher Quality is School Quality Model

The vast majority of informants identified teachers as a determinant of student achievement and as a direct (if not *the only*) measure of a school’s overall quality. The qualities most often associated with good teachers were innate “caring” about their job and their students, and related to this, the willingness, commitment and ability to motivate individual children. For these reasons, one-on-one time with teachers was seen as a valuable and limited resource. This model for understanding teacher time as a resource explains why so many informants perceived the need for “smaller classes.” The

model of a good teacher is a caring, motivating teacher is nested in the larger mentalist model that attributes success primarily to an individual's motivation.

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

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

White Conservative Man, age 26-29, New Hampshire

If a teacher that really doesn't care, like 'okay, you didn't turn in your homework, I'm just going to mark you down bad.' You know, where the other one is like 'all right, you know what? We'll-we'll work on some of this and we'll do something for you, or you know, let's work something out...' Some people just have that and some people don't. Like some people are meant to be teachers and some people aren't.

Hispanic-American Conservative Woman, age 26, California

Well, you know, a good teacher... [SIGHS] Fires up the kids, just like make the kids want to go to school. He's a nice teacher, you know, that stuff. Case in point, my last name. One teacher out of all those years in school dared to even just pronounce my last name. So only one. So I thought she was the coolest person... Good teachers inspire the students to learn.

Asian-American Liberal Man, age 44, California

But I think smaller schools is the answer... I know a teacher gets overwhelmed. You got 30 kids, you can't keep your eyes on, you can't help each one of them. But if you break it down to like 15 people, it's more...comforting and it's more one-on-one.

African-American Liberal Man, age 35, Connecticut

2. Teacher Accountability Model

Without being asked any direct questions about accountability, nearly a quarter of informants emphasized the importance of some aspect of teacher accountability. In addition to this model of teachers being accountable for educational outcomes, there were more specific models that focused on the need for bad teachers to be fired and for teachers to be paid in accordance with their performance.

Informant: *You get some teachers who aren't doing too good of a job sometimes. I have never heard of a teacher being fired. And I'm sure they're all not that great.*

Interviewer: *Do you feel like there needs to be more accountability in the system?*

Informant: *Yes, absolutely. It's a very difficult thing to do. They're trying to use test grades to judge schools and judge teachers... They really should have more observations... have people come in and observe them while they're working.*

White Conservative Man, age 65, Connecticut

It's terrible because [teachers] are not awarded on performance. They're awarded on longevity. So you know... you can be cranky and irritable, but you're basically cranky and irritable and stay there and you're rewarded. You're not awarded by how many kids actually pass.

White Liberal Man, age 46-55, Rhode Island

I think the teachers need to be more accountable... They're the ones that are responsible for educating the students... and the thing is, the teachers keep screaming for more and more money, and I don't think they deserve it, to tell you the truth. Good teachers are hard to find, and we should compensate them when we have them, but what we're doing is we're doing it across the board for everybody and I don't think that's fair. It's not fair because they're not doing an equal job.

White Conservative Woman, age 62, California

Recessive Models: Thinking Beyond Interactions with Teachers

There were also some more promising ways in which some informants were able to think beyond student-teacher interactions and identify other influences on educational outcomes. These models were not dominant, and fail to reveal a coherent way of thinking about larger influences. However, they highlight the ways in which some informants, when probed, were able to escape the individual interactions cultural model.

1. Broad Ecological Model about "Inner City Nightmares"

As discussed in the previous section, informants saw the home environment as the primary determinant of student and school success. The next level of responsibility fell on the teachers that interact on an individual level with students. Ecological or environmental thinking about educational outcomes was rare. The only model that emerged from data analysis that considered the environment as a causal factor was what we refer to as "inner city nightmares." Close to a fifth of informants made reference to the "inner city" as a terrible environment for students, one that affected a student's

ability to succeed. Drugs, gangs and violence were the dominant features of these “inner city nightmares.” This is clearly a negative model of school environments but there was little discussion during interviews of how environments might have positive effects on schooling. This leads us to believe that there is no cultural model in place for people to use in thinking about how school and community environments might positively shape the success of students and the schools they attend.

If someone doesn't want to learn... well, I guess it all depends how their upbringing and I mean, you watch TV, and you see some kids who are mean and everything, and gangs... it is tougher in the city though... than in a small community.

White Conservative Woman, age 56, Connecticut

You know, the teachers can only do so much, but it depends on the environment. It depends on the location... City schools are different... I just think in cities, it's a huge amount of drug and alcohol abuse, and...you know, lack of participation. And a lot of kids don't even make it to school.

White Conservative Woman, age 46-55, Rhode Island

2. School Structures Model

Although clearly secondary in explanations, over a quarter of informants did at some point during their interview mention the importance of the physical resources of schools, ranging from the cleanliness and safety of school buildings, to the availability of supplies. Discussions of school facilities tended to occur in the context of discussions of how to improve schools and education, and typically followed “increases in funding” as a way to improve education.

[Talking about things that influence student learning]

Informant: *The whole atmosphere of the school. We have a brand new school... They said the kids do much better now...*

Interviewer: *What sorts of things changed?*

Informant: *The whole school! [LAUGHS] The building. Yeah, and the atmosphere. It's brand new. Everything at the gym. There were toxins in the building. Oh, it's gorgeous. It's beautiful. Very large. Wonderful library... lots of different resource rooms... different offices where the kids could go... lots of computers. I think they tripled the computers. And they use them more.*

White Independent Woman, age 50-59, New Hampshire

Implications: What the Primacy of Individual Interactions with Teachers Means

What's Missing: Importance of Environments and Training

Although recessive models appear promising in expanding thinking about factors that shape educational outcomes, they were clearly secondary. In addition the dominant models are limiting in important ways.

1. Influence of Ecological Factors, including School Organization and Policy

Just as focusing solely on individuals and families obscures the importance of schools and communities, focusing only on students' individual interactions with teachers crowds out larger ecological factors.

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

Asian Independent Woman, age 57, Massachusetts

2. Importance of Teacher Training

Apart from focusing on teachers generally, the tendency to judge them primarily by the degree to which they “care” and their ability to inspire and motivate children undermines the value of content knowledge, the ability to communicate concepts, and other products of teacher training that teachers bring to classrooms – in a word, their professionalism. Caring and “people skills,” seen as vital qualifications for a good teacher, were perceived by informants as “natural” and difficult to teach. In this way, teacher training, teacher collaboration, continuing education and professional development appear unnecessary.

Policy Implications:

1. Teacher Accountability Makes Sense, but Training & Proficiency is Hard to Think

When informants thought about improving teaching, they tended to think only about increasing accountability. While some reformers may be interested in related reforms, public thinking needs to shift dramatically towards a realization of the importance of teacher training, proficiency in content areas, and the mastery of skills rather than continuing to focus on personality traits.

2. Smaller Classes Makes Sense

Because one-on-one time with teachers is seen to be important for acquiring motivation, informants recognized the importance of smaller class sizes. To engage the public around reforms other than adjustments to student-teacher ratios, reformers will have to demonstrate how some approaches and resources can make a difference, despite larger

than ideal classes. When reformers talk about individualized attention, other purposes such as “scaffolding” (loosely, meeting a child wherever her knowledge base is and helping her build from there) should be used to shift this teacher interaction model in a more productive direction and avoid reinforcing the mentalist model that focuses too heavily on individual motivation and responsibility.

3. Restructuring Public Education is Hard to Think

Focusing narrowly on finding caring and motivating teachers impedes consideration and inhibits imagination of the sweeping structural changes to the education system that reformers call for. In order to conceptualize a total re-vamp of our current education system, the public will have to be given ways of thinking about how the larger structure of the system influences educational outcomes. Re-conceptualizing understandings of the workings of the education system and the process of its reform have been identified as promising areas to explore in upcoming focus group and simplifying models research.

ADDITIONAL MODELS

Beyond the individualist cultural models used by informants, there were two other dominant models of particular relevance that deserve mention here. The cultural model that informants used to think about preschool and the powerful metaphorical model used to think about schools as businesses are reviewed briefly below. The implications of these models are also presented.

Preschool is Only for Social Learning Model

Emergent Model

More than half of the interview informants spoke about the importance of preschool for learning to get along and interact with others outside of the home environment, primarily in preparation for entering kindergarten. Most informants saw this social learning as important and valuable, but few saw many additional benefits, and no one mentioned other developmental benefits of preschool. In addition some informants saw the social “work” that preschools do as a naturally occurring development in the stages of childhood, a stage that requires no formal education or training. Therefore, for these participants, preschool attendance was seen as unnecessary, not “real” education, and even a bit silly.

I think kids develop those social skills probably a little bit faster if they're in preschool... just learning how to get along with other kids. You know. Getting them out of the house and having some recognition as...seeing the teacher as someone who you learn from.

White Liberal Man, age 30-39, New Hampshire

The most valuable thing [you get out of preschool] is being independent. You know, like that's it. I mean, you're still with mommy and daddy, once you take them to preschool, you detach them from that umbilical cord.

Hispanic-American Liberal Woman, age 30-35, Rhode Island

I couldn't evaluate like the learning part because I think it's so minimal. I mean a lot of it is finger painting and that kind of stuff. I think that's more the socialization. ...I don't think they really teach any reading at all... And again, a lot of preschool is supposed to be really a lot of fun too. You know, kids dance around and they do all sorts of stuff. I don't know that it's educational really.

White Independent Man, age 37, California

I believe that preschool was conceptually set up as one thing, kind of a babysitting service, and where it's tax funded babysitting service for programs like Head Start and networks... I just don't see a lot of positive in that...

White Democratic Man, 55, California

Policy Implications of Narrow Views about Preschool as Social Learning

Focusing only on the limited social benefits of preschool, and seeing this social learning as an inevitable stage of development obscures the value of preschool for cognitive development and for other types of learning. If preschools are for social development, which is seen to unfold naturally (i.e. *without* preschool), then it follows from this model that, while preschool may be “nice,” kids don't really need to go. This model for understanding child development and the benefits of preschool is a direct barrier to policies such as universal or even targeted preschool. If the only value of preschool is to teach kids to “get along,” preschool policies will never be priorities and will have little traction among the American public. Reformers need to provide the public with new ways of thinking about preschool that emphasize the wide range of developmental outcomes that are at stake during this pivotal stage of child development.

Consumerist Models

Consistent with past FrameWorks research, informants employed a series of models nested in the more general consumerist model that Americans use in thinking about a wide range of issues. The basis of the consumerist model is that the world works like a market, that events occurring around us can be understood as interactions between rational producers and consumers who think in terms of “bottom line” profits. In the consumerist model, students and their families are positioned as consumers who compete for educational product (conceptualized as the teacher's time).

1. Schools Should be Run Like Businesses Model

Analysis of interview data showed a clear pattern of assumptions whereby schools are seen to fail when they do not sufficiently resemble businesses or when they are not subject to “natural” market pressures of competition and supply and demand. According to this model, schools fail when they are subjected to unnatural rules and regulations handed down from “above.” These “state” regulations hamper schools and restrict the competition that informants saw as vital to the success of all organizations. Informants reported that if schools were subject to the same competition as businesses and made decisions based on the bottom line, they would be more efficient and would provide a better product (education) to consumers (students and their families).

[Talking about how to eliminate waste] *Well [school] can be run like a business. I mean there are entire rooms full of books in school that they will not use, have never used... Because the person who does the purchasing was taken to a really nice lunch by the book person... You know just stupid stuff. Sometimes the purchasing comes down to one person. So yeah, there's a lot of waste. What a waste! I think a company would be more careful.*

Asian-American Liberal Woman, age 43, California

Well, it-it-it's like any [area of] government, a government is a business. It should be run like a business.

Hispanic-American Independent Man, age 49, California

2. Paying is Motivating Model

Also nested in broad consumerist cultural model is a more specific model used to explain differences in individual motivation and, by extension, differential outcomes (see the mentalist model). According to the paying is motivating model, consumers of education—students and their parents—have more at stake when they pay for something. In terms of thinking about education, people employing this model reason that when individuals pay tuition, they are more invested and therefore more motivated to get as much out of the education that they are paying for. The underlying assumption in this model is that when you pay for something you are motivated to get as much out of the thing that you are paying for as possible. Closely related to this problematic thinking is the fact that informants cannot see a public (“free”) purpose for education and so, once in consumerist mode, paying defines a threshold activity. Nearly a fifth of informants employed elements of this model and used this line of reasoning to explain why private schools achieve higher educational outcomes and why higher education tends to work better than K-12 public education. However, this model of paying is motivating was never once applied to thinking about paying taxes as a source of motivation.

[In talking about private versus public schools] If some thing's free, you tend to value it less than when you pay for it.

White Conservative Man, age 30-39, New Hampshire

Informant: *A lot of [college students] are paying their own money...*

Interviewer: *What is the affect of... paying their own money?...*

Informant: *...Outcomes are overwhelmingly determined by the emotional postures of the participants. And the emotional postures of the participants in [the higher education] system, are likely to be very different... They have to forgo a lot of consumption in order to do the production of learning. They have to forgo perhaps buying an iPhone... a surf trip to Baja... And that by itself tends to produce more discipline.*

White Conservative Man, age 54, California

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

White Independent Woman, age 50-59, New Hampshire

3. *Weighing Costs and Benefits of Higher Education Model*

Almost all informants felt that higher education was important for individuals to be successful—this is in line with the individualist model informants used to understand the purpose of education. Roughly half of the sample employed the concept of cost/benefit analysis to discuss higher education. According to these informants, the primary factor keeping many students from pursuing higher education was that the high costs of education frequently outweighed the benefits. These informants thought that, in choosing to obtain a higher education, individuals should weight the costs of attendance against the financial benefits of an eventually higher income. Many commented that, in the current state of higher education, the costs frequently outweigh the benefits. This cost/benefit imbalance was used to voice dissatisfaction with the high cost of higher education in America today.

My son who's not sure what he wants to go into school for, we're going to let him take a class in that technology school next year... so he'll touch on all this stuff and hopefully he'll enjoy one of [the subjects], and maybe give him a little bit of an idea of what to do at college so he don't waste all that money with something he doesn't like.

White Independent Woman, age 40-49, New Hampshire

[Talking about whether the higher education system works] *That all comes down to the individuals basically. Today it's so very expensive that if you don't have the proper attitude, you shouldn't even be there.. If you're not going to go there with all energy to get it done, then I think, you know, you shouldn't be there period. It's just too expensive.*

White Independent Man, age 56-59, Massachusetts

Policy Implications of the Consumerist Models

This view of schools as businesses may be highly problematic for reformers invested in the social purposes of education. These consumerist models conceptualize education as a consumer good. Within the consumerist models, the benefits of educational goods are seen to accrue only to individuals, and exist in limited quantities such that consumers must compete with other consumers to get as much as they can of this limited resource (this has been called “Zero Sum Thinking” in past FrameWorks research). In other words, this model pits students against each other in ways that undermine the collective benefits and social purposes of education.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

1. Most informants found it hard to “think” collective benefits of education. Reformers will need to develop specific strategies to frame the social purposes and benefits of education to engage public support and funding for education policy change.
2. Responsibility for educational outcomes is a problematic concept. Most informants had difficulty holding schools responsible for educational outcomes and saw system or school responsibility as excusing individuals and families from responsibility. This tendency is due to a powerful cultural model in which parents are the cause of student and school failure and success. Reformers need to develop strategies that frame the importance of structural influences on educational outcomes, and the capacity of public actors to affect these outcomes.
3. Emphasizing ways in which schools are not providing equal opportunity to students may be more effective for securing public support for broad reforms than highlighting unequal outcomes. Although most informants saw individuals as responsible for outcomes, many saw schools as responsible for providing opportunities. This opportunity model represents a chance to engage public support for reforms at the school and policy-level.
4. Reformers' communication strategies need to draw attention to the many influences on student achievement in schools beyond just caring teachers. The public needs a vivid and concrete way to think about the effects of school leadership and organization on educational outcomes.

5. Informants saw only limited value of preschool, in which the only benefit conferred by attending preschool was the development of social skills, a natural outcome of normal child development. The benefits of preschool and the process of child development need careful reframing work if the public is to realize the necessity of quality preschool education for all children.
6. Finally, reformers should be wary of the business model of schools and focus attention on shifting patterns of public thinking from “individuals as consumers of education” to the collective benefits and importance for society of equity in educational resources.

CONCLUSION

This report describes and examines the implications of dominant ways of thinking about American education as evidenced by in-depth interviews with citizens of five states. It considers the limitations of the cultural models currently in place in shaping thinking about schooling, particularly from a highly individualist perspective, and identifies the ways in which this thinking is most problematic for those working toward educational reform.

Ultimately, the report demonstrates the pressing need for reformers to work on providing Americans with alternative ways of thinking about education in order to shift public thinking away from education as an individual issue, and toward the social purposes and importance of policy in reforming the current system. Subsequent phases of research will explore precisely how reformers can most successfully address the limitations in thinking that have been presented here.

The Americans interviewed for this round of research clearly care deeply about education. If they can be given new frames and reformers can activate a different set of cultural models, the public will be better positioned to think about and understand the broader societal benefits of education and the need for educational reform.

Education is the key. White, blonde, purple – I don't care what you are, education is the key.

African-American Liberal Man, age 35, Connecticut

The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit research organization founded in 1999 to advance the nonprofit sector's communications capacity by identifying, translating and modeling relevant scholarly research for framing the public discourse about social problems. It has become known for its development of Strategic Frame Analysis™, which roots communications practice in the cognitive and social sciences. FrameWorks designs, commissions, manages and publishes multi-method, multi-disciplinary communications research to prepare nonprofit organizations to expand their constituency base, to build public will, and to further public understanding of specific social issues. In addition to working closely with scientists and social policy experts familiar with the specific issue, its work is informed by communications scholars and practitioners who are convened to discuss the research problem, and to work together in outlining potential strategies for advancing public understanding of remedial policies. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

This report was prepared for the FrameWorks Institute by Hilary Chart and Nat Kendall-Taylor.

All FrameWorks research reports are edited by the Institute.

© FrameWorks Institute 2008