

# Strategically Framed Letters to the Editor

*Strategic framers take every opportunity to use communicate a reframed understanding of their issue to the public. Letters to the editor and op/eds are perhaps the most under-used tools in the advocacy toolkit. Even in an era of ubiquitous blogging, printed letters to the editor reach a wide audience and offer a unique forum for reframing the conversation about social issues. Public officials and policy makers regularly read letters and opinion sections to stay informed about the perspectives shaping the public's thinking.*

*The following sample letters to the editor are written in support of a fictitious education advocacy coalition. They are examples of how to use the media to advance a new frame about education and related policies, and contain language that can be incorporated into your own writing on these topics.*

To the Editor:

Schools aren't often thought of as economic engines, but every morning as I welcome our children into the school building, I realize that, as their principal, I am playing an important role in our state's future economy. The skills we prepare children with today are the skills we have available for our state workforce tomorrow.

As a faculty, we have recently been studying some of the newest discoveries in neuroscience for how to create optimal learning conditions. We now know that skills develop much like ropes are woven. When we offer active learning opportunities that braid multiple strands — cognitive, social, emotional and physical — the resulting abilities are stronger and more flexible than they would be if we neglected one strand or another.

Our kindergarten teachers know this well. They see our students at the beginning of their school careers and can tell which children have spent their earliest years in healthy environments, surrounded by a network of caring adults who have given them many chances to weave the ropes of new skills — and which children have not. When daycare centers have poorly-trained caregivers, or too many children to care for, this has negative consequences for the weaving process.

That's why I support Moving Schools Forward, a coalition working to ensure better-trained staff and lower student-teacher ratios in early childhood programs. Help make the future bright for our children and our state by supporting this coalition.

To the Editor:

Our city's progress is at stake when students' learning gets off track. With this in mind, the Moving Schools Forward coalition is calling for a better and more sensible way to keep an eye on how well children are progressing in their learning. As a school counselor, I think this is an idea whose time has come.

A recent article mentioned the coalition's initiative, but didn't quite do it justice. The idea is for schools to start thinking about assessment as if it were a dashboard on a car. We need many kinds of information as we drive – how much gas is left, how fast the car is going – but perhaps the most important information comes from what you observe directly and constantly through the windshields and mirrors. Similarly, in education, the most important kind of information for adjusting teaching is the observations that educators make about ongoing student work.

Under the coalition's proposal, standardized tests would be treated more like you might use an odometer. It gives you the information you need to plan for your next car purchase, but we all know it would be dangerous to drive only looking the odometer. The same holds true in education. Trends in test scores in major subjects are useful for schools in some ways – they are something we should check in on periodically. But when standardized tests are the only assessment we pay attention to, then teaching can easily get off track.

Giving teachers time to work in teams to thoughtfully analyze student work is an important step in making the 'windshield' a more important part of our approach to assessment. I hope that our city will keep this in mind and support the proposed changes to the school calendar, which are intended to give teachers a chance to look at all the information that a dashboard of assessments can offer.

To the Editor:

The arrival of spring has yielded features and photographs celebrating various educational gardens in the region – thank you for including these in the “Seen About Town” feature. The growing trend of school gardens has been touted as an important way to spark conversations about the food and fitness environment, and schools and afterschool programs often draw on the gardens to teach various life sciences lessons. But these gardens can be sites for lessons that integrate not just science, but also technology, engineering, and math – disciplines collectively known as STEM. Workforce experts have noted that these are the fields that will be in high demand in the world the next generation will inherit, so these gardens are growing tomorrow’s economy as well as herbs and vegetables.

How so? In the garden, students do math: measuring rainfall or plant growth, calculating the precise portions for mixing plant food with water. They conduct scientific observations – making note of the impact of insects or fertilizer – and experimental trials, manipulating variables of water or other substances added to gardens. They evaluate technology, identify opportunities for work to be made more efficient or effective through the use of physical aids, and determine which tools are necessary for which jobs. They think and act like engineers, designing and building support structures for various plants. These hands-on lessons in math, science, engineering, and technology travel from the classroom to the garden space and back again, as do the scientific habits of collaboration, problem-finding, and problem-solving.

In this way, these gardens are pollination points, not just for visiting butterflies, but for the students themselves. Evidence tells us that learners need multiple ways to engage their attention and motivate their learning – particularly for STEM skills – just as pollinating insects must touch multiple flowers to do their work. Learning opportunities that engage students in multiple spaces, times, and activities help students cross-pollinate ideas in ways that truly grow concepts and ways of thinking.

That’s why I support Moving Schools Forward, a coalition working to provide more hands-on learning opportunities in our local schools. Let’s celebrate gardens not just for what they teach students about where food comes from, but as ideal spaces for the kind of teaching and learning that’s needed for the modern era - fertile learning spaces where students can come into contact with critical knowledge and skills.

To the Editor:

The recent article describing the teacher of the year's focus on media literacy featured a perfect example of the kind of teaching that should be the "new normal" if our goal is to prepare students to lead our communities in the future.

For the next generation to ready to be leaders, not just followers, youth need opportunities to practice working effectively with information: to be able to find information, judge its quality, and learn when and how to mix it together with other information to be able to make sense of the world around them. Similar to cooks who select, mix and prepare ingredients together to make meals, youth also need to learn how to select and work with information to produce knowledge. This kind of hands-on practice is the best way to develop the judgment needed to distinguish valid information from biased, incomplete, or inaccurate information. These skills are important for youth to develop early, so that they have the critical thinking skills they need to make good decisions as voters, neighborhood residents, and workers in our economy.

That's why I support the Moving Schools Forward coalition, which is encouraging a modern and more sensible approach to teacher education programs. To grow more teachers like our teacher of the year, our state should set the expectation that all new teachers are prepared to approach their role as if they were guiding new cooks in a kitchen. The best teachers for a modern world more like a 'mentor chef' who sets up experiences and challenges for students, then watches carefully as students get their hands dirty in the learning kitchen.

Students thrive in this kind of learning environment, and we all benefit from students who have the skills they need to participate productively and thoughtfully in our city life.