Enough Blame To Go Around:

Understanding the Public Discourse on Education Reform

A FrameWorks Research Report

Prepared for the FrameWorks Institute

February 2009

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Speaking to a packed audience at Stanford University, California State Senator Joe Simitian characterized the U.S. educational system as a "sinking ship" in a hopeless state of continued deterioration. This metaphor continues to characterize American schools, he argued, because Americans know so little about how the U.S. educational system actually functions that their efforts to initiate and support education reform are ill-informed and poorly structured. Making matters worse, he argued, the political "blame game" among legislators and school officials who "refuse to take responsibility" for the policy failures of recent education reform initiatives, is now a popular pastime despite worsening student outcomes.[1]

Simitian is not alone in his views and one could safely argue that such views epitomize mainstream perspectives on the state of our nation's schools – perspectives that are routinely expressed and accepted as conventional wisdom in American public discourse. Over the course of 18 focus groups, conducted in 7 cities with diverse groups of politically engaged people around the United States, FrameWorks Institute researchers heard these perspectives (and others) expressed as part of our analysis of how Americans think about education and the prospects for reform. In general, focus group participants understood the education system as "failing" but lacked any detailed knowledge about the functioning of the system, and any coherent vision for deep systemic reforms that might improve educational outcomes for students. They were, however, quite vocal in their attributions of blame for the failure -- a shared culpability among teachers, parents, students and a "system" that metes out educational resources unequally across schools. As one participant simply put it, "there is enough blame to go around."

This report, the second in a larger two-year investigation supported by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation and the Lumina Foundation for Education, outlines the results of those focus groups. The full scope of this project includes an array of methods associated with the Strategic Frame Analysis™ approach: cultural models interviews, focus groups, media content analysis, cognitive media content analysis, Simplifying Models[2] development and empirical testing of frame effects using experimental surveys.

The focus group findings detailed in this report directly follow the first phase of our research -- 50 cultural models interviews conducted in New England and Southern California in June of 2008. Those interviews were designed to identify cultural models (broad collections of shared understandings, norms, and normative assumptions) that Americans use to think about the U.S. education system and prospects for education reform.[3]

---

[1] Hernández, Joaquín, 2006 (October 16). Senator Simitian says K-12 education is failing. *Stanford Daily News*.

[2] At FrameWorks, a simplifying model helps to bridge the gap between expert and lay understandings of an issue. Empirically tested, it explains complex ideas using metaphors or mechanistic statements that facilitate thinking and understanding on an issue by helping individuals conceptualize information. As such, it is considered a critical frame element.

[3] Chart, H. and N. Kendall-Taylor. "Reform What?: Individualist Thinking in Education: American Cultural Models on Schooling," Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute 2008.

In this second phase of our analysis, we used a more exploratory and iterative focus group approach to expand upon the results of the individual interviews. The focus groups provided us an opportunity to see how those cultural models function in a social setting that more closely approximated the social contexts in which these discussions about education might naturally occur, are used, and negotiated. In addition, the focus groups allowed us the opportunity to experiment with potential reframes to see if we could achieve a different conversation than what characterized the individual cultural models interviews.

After a brief summary of the findings and a description of the methodology, the focus group findings are presented through four sets of interrelated discourses that characterized the way focus group participants discussed education: (1) the state of education in the United States as essential but failing; (2) participant explanations for system failure; (3) visible components of the education system; (4) unequal education funding and resources; and (5) the efficacy of education reform efforts. While more extensive reframing recommendations remain to be identified in subsequent research, we nevertheless conclude this report with several recommendations that naturally emerged from this phase of the research.

SUMMARY OF THE FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

1. Education is essential and failing. Within the larger discourse surrounding the state of education in the United States today, there were two more specific but very dominant discourses that shaped participants' thinking. These discourses are considered dominant because of their demonstrated power to "crowd out" all other topics during focus group discussions, leading in unproductive "dead-ends" and to hold captive any progressive thinking about how improvements in educational outcomes for students can be achieved. Moreover, consistent with the findings from cultural models interviews, the discourses about both the essentialness of education and the failing state of system were most often conceptualized and expressed using the dominant cultural model of educational responsibility in which the parent-student-teacher triad is narrowly and exclusively culpable.

2. Systems thinking is possible, but shallow. Despite the fact that focus group discussions typically centered on the parent-student-teacher triad, there were important points in these discussions where participants *did* focus on more systems level or public policy deliberations. These points sometimes emerged organically during the natural course of group conversations, but more typically surfaced with the help of deliberate, purposeful priming by FrameWorks' researchers. In these priming exercises, the researcher attempts, by introducing promising values and concepts that emerged from cultural models interviews, to shift the focus group conversations *away* from the dominant discourses—for example, the overwhelming conversational focus on the "triad"—and *towards* more productive conversational directions. Visible aspects of the system, such as school facilities, resources, policies, pedagogy, and curricula were primes that shifted what were largely individualistic discussions to conversations that focused more on components of the educational *system* – albeit in sometimes problematic ways. Overall, this finding suggests opportunities for redirecting discourse.

Priming participants to think about the equality of funding was also strongly associated with discussions that consistently emphasized the importance of systems, environments, and programs rather than individuals and individual responsibility. In contrast with the results of individual

interviews, inequality of educational resources emerged as a very strong systemic and recurrent topic of conversation throughout the focus groups. Participants expressed frustration with the abundance of quality educational environments, resources, courses, and qualified teachers in wealthy schools and districts, while poor areas were left without the educational resources that families and students needed. In almost universal fashion, participants asserted that all children should have equal access to a quality education and the opportunity to succeed but expressed frustration over the failure of "government" to provide such opportunities *across the board—in all places*. While this discrepancy was most often discussed in terms of income, differences by race (often coded in terms of place—"urban" or "inner city") were also raised. Concomitantly, the issue of school funding had implications for most other areas of discussion in the groups. For example, there was quite a bit of dissension about the idea of providing support services to parents when participants had to simultaneously think about how those supports would be paid for.

3. Even apparent systems-level discussions reveal individualist thinking. More generally though, on a variety of topics that should have naturally invited more systems level discussion, participants *individualized* their proposals for reform (i.e. solving the perceived curricula problems with individualized learning plans for students). So, even when participants started at the systems level by talking about policies, procedures, curricula, inequality of resources, they ended up at individual level solutions and suggestions for change. As a result, their ability to see the *systems* part of the educational achievement equation did not get them to organically see systemic solutions without being deliberately primed to do so. This important disconnect was true even in their frequent discussions of the educational *system* as broken – with the subsequent discussion about why the system was broken almost always centered on *individuals* or the aggregate failings of individual parents, students and teachers. So, although participants clearly accessed the language of *systems* to broach the subject of failing schools, their explanations about the reasons for this failure was structured largely by individualist thinking. Failures of the system were routinely boiled down to the failure of a fairly small set of circumscribed individual actors within those systems. Put another way, focus groups revealed a discourse that is only superficially systemic; scratch the surface and the attribution of responsibility is readily accorded to individuals.

4. Dominant cultural models explain some of this default to individualism. Why is it problematic when the language of "systems" devolves to "individual" level reforms? Cultural models theory suggests that, while people can *recognize* the value of collective action, the deep and dominant patterns of thinking that Americans use to *understand* their social worlds tend to emphasize the role of the individual in society (i.e. American rugged individualism) and of families (i.e. the Family Bubble). These highly dominant cultural models, therefore, make it much easier to think about education reform solutions from individual and family vantage points even though we can acknowledge more structural or systemic problems. In other words, while Americans can *recognize* some systemic causes related to education, existent cultural models make individual and family level solutions more cognitively rewarding and easier to think. The challenge of reframing will lie, to some degree, in giving further cognitive power to the nascent systems models observed in these focus groups.

5. Disempowerment, lack of agency and social distance all contribute to the lack of systems thinking. In addition to this cultural models explanation, our work on education strongly conveyed three other related and reinforcing forces that explain the tendency to generate individual or family level solutions where systems-level solutions might also be appropriate: feelings of disempowerment in relation to schools systems, a general lack of agency, and a perceived social distance from reform efforts. To overcome these barriers to realizing systems-level solutions, we initiated a set of exercises meant to widen the narrow lens through which participants typically approached notions of education reform. Given the penchant for talking about reform at the individual and family level, it should come as little surprise that there was still (even after priming for "social" purposes and responsibility) a great deal of talk about parental involvement, discipline, and motivation. Even so, the primed discussions *did* include more materialist[4] suggestions – ranging from making classrooms smaller and giving principals more control over the hiring and firing of teachers, to having a community emphasis on nutrition and health (among other things), to having schools function as large community centers more broadly. While not all ideas offered by participants constitute feasible policy directions, the primes did open up a space for participants to think very broadly about the possibilities for educational reform.

When participants were primed to talk about education as a necessary public service, they tended to move away from thinking in terms of educating the individual and what individuals needed to do to be successful, in favor of a pattern of thinking that emphasized the need to educate the collective whole and the negative impact on society when the system fails to provide most citizens with a high quality education. In our attempt to get participants to think *even more* deeply about education and school reform efforts, we introduced an additional series of primes. Several of these primes *did* move participants' thinking in more promising (less mentalist[5]) directions: *equality of opportunity*, *education for the Common Good of society, and global competitiveness and preparedness (for the 21st century)*. In particular, global competitiveness and preparedness for the 21st century were areas in which there was no confusion about who should provide these skills—where the responsibility fell squarely on schools and programs rather than narrowly on parents or caring teachers. Other experimental primes had more mixed results and tentative implications – these included discussions of such concepts as *well-roundedness, accountability, community involvement, mentally and physically healthy environments, child development and publicly funding preschool.*

---

[4] The term 'materialist' here refers to the extent to which people can see that social problems, solutions, and subsequent outcomes are, in part, a reflection of the material conditions in society. That is, they are able to see the context around which problems emerge and individuals live as well as to understand that those contexts affect and shape individual behavior. In the paper, we often contrast this term with another term 'mentalist' which refers alternatively to the ways in which people see problems, solutions, and outcomes as a matter of individual characteristics like discipline, motivation, and character.

[5] See footnote 4.

In addition, the focus groups revealed several areas where "cognitive holes"[6] limited the thinking of focus group participants to such a degree that they had difficulty making useful connections to systems level thinking. These holes will need to be "filled" to encourage a more robust discourse. The holes included inabilities of participants to conceptualize: (1) *the educational system, (2) responsibility for educating children, (3) preschool as school, (4) the community, (5) ways that school systems can address inequality, and* (6) *21st century skills*[7].

Finally, although it is too early in our research process to offer any specific communications recommendations, we conclude this report with a few general recommendations that emerged naturally from our analysis of the focus groups.

RESEARCH SCOPE AND METHODS

In this focus group research, our objective was to determine the patterned and standardized ways of talking—or social discourses—that Americans use to talk about education and the extent to which those discourses and the cultural models that support these ways of talking allow individuals to envision the broader, fundamental workings of the American education *system*. At FrameWorks, we work from the assumption, well documented in the literature, that the capacity of the lay public to understand "how the U.S. educational system functions" and then envision opportunities for reform, is a critical cognitive step toward enhancing broad public support for key education reform policies. In short, we believe that how Americans understand the education system (as well as what contributes to their inability to do so) influences their capacity to comprehend the impact of education reform and their role in its achievement.

The focus groups we conducted were used to bridge an understanding of the dominant cultural models in education (from our cultural models interviews conducted in the first phase of the project) with the development/empirical validation of reframes and simplifying models in the second phase of our research. We were especially interested in reframes and models that have the potential to lift up systems-level thinking in education and provide an appreciation of the "social" aspects of education and its reform. That is to say that this phase of FrameWorks research is both descriptive of patterns in public thinking, affording an important adjunct to the interviews, and exploratory, in that it experiments with potential reframes which will be further winnowed and tested in the quantitative phase.

The remainder of this section of the report presents the research methods employed in conducting the focus groups as well as the analytical strategy used in their design. Furthermore, a brief summary of the key findings from the cultural models interviews that preceded these focus groups can be found in the appendix.

---

[6] A cognitive "hole" represents an area where no cultural model is readily available or where the model that is employed by the *public* to think about the concept is dissonant from the expert's understanding.

[7] As we discuss in the Cognitive Holes portion of the paper, although people could see that a new set of skills might be necessary to compete in the 21 century, they had problems envisioning what those skills might be.

Focus Group Data Collection Methods

A total of 18 focus groups were conducted with United States citizens in September and October of 2008. They were held in seven cities across the nation: Baltimore, Maryland; Montpelier, Vermont; Manchester, New Hampshire; Boston, Massachusetts; Memphis, Tennessee; Indianapolis, Indiana; and Sacramento, California.

Participants were recruited by a professional marketing firm using screening criteria developed by FrameWorks researchers. At each location, eight people per group (along with an overflow of 4 to 6 individuals who did not participate except in cases of absenteeism) were screened, selected, and provided with an honorarium for their time and participation. The pool of participants that were selected represented variation along domains of ethnicity, gender, age, educational background, and political ideology (as self-reported during the screening process). We explicitly selected participants who reported a strong interest in current events and active involvement in their communities. We should also note that we screened out people who were employed or have been employed in an educational institution because we believed that those individuals would have dominated the group dynamic and/or that other participants would defer to them as representatives of an educational institution rather than express their own viewpoints.

Based on previous FrameWorks research, we thought the responses to our questions would be particularly sensitive to variations in educational attainment and race. As a result, the focus groups were organized across race and educational categories (as discussed in the text of the report). More specifically, eleven of the focus groups were racially homogenous (4 black, 4 white, and 3 Latino) and 7 were racially mixed. Further varying groups by education level, 7 of the groups had bachelor's degrees or above, 7 had some college or less, and 4 had a combination of education levels.

All focus groups lasted approximately 2 hours and were audio and video recorded as well as transcribed. Quotes are provided in the report to illustrate major points but identifying information has been excluded to ensure participant anonymity.

These focus groups are directed conversations and as such follow a fixed guide and are moderated by a trained facilitator. They often introduce framed passages or "primes" which are designed to influence the discussion. In this, they contrast to the cultural models interview technique, where discussion is allowed to ensue without framing directions from the facilitator.

What to Look For in the Report Findings

The focus groups were designed to capture the viral nature of people's viewpoints on education, or more simply, how views about the educational system are communicated, debated, negotiated and then concluded, within a semi-public forum.   In our analysis of the focus group discussions, we paid particular attention to the extent to which the public discourse on education cued up or drew upon existent cultural models as well as *what* points of view ultimately "trumped" or seemed to win over others in the public debate of these issues and *how* these "winning" or more successful views were expressed.

We were also interested in the degree to which intentionally priming the conversation with new information and perspectives on the issue could *redirect* these dominant discourses. This is in marked contrast to the cultural models interviews where discussion is pursued without priming from the facilitator.

Additionally, we were interested in the extent to which specific discourses were consistently connected to others. For example, in the context of the discussion of education as a vehicle for social mobility, a "spin-off" discussion about the importance of education as social mobility for "disadvantaged," "minority" or "low-income" groups almost always followed. The latter discourse usually took on a life of its own and morphed into a broader discussion of inequalities, even though social mobility is not an experience (or desire) exclusive to minority or low-income groups. In this way, we would say that 'education as social mobility' seems to consistently "stick to" or elicit a concomitant discourse about inequality.

Finally, we looked for places where focus group participants consistently had a difficult time conceptualizing ideas related to education and school reform, leading to "cognitive holes" in their thinking and persistent inabilities to understand, explain, and think generatively about a concept or issue. The identification of these holes is critical because once they are filled with an empirically tested frame element (a value or a simplifying model), an improved understanding is likely to create more productive perspectives and thinking on specific policies and educational issues.

Using this analytic lens to unravel the "talk" in the focus groups, we were able to begin identifying areas of discussion and types of discourse that are particularly illuminating and promising for potential reframes. Many of these points are referred to in the findings as "points of discovery" for ease of interpretation and review.

The findings in the next section of the report are organized along four sets of interrelated discourses that we found particularly illuminating: (1) the state of education in the United States as essential but failing; (2) participant explanations for system failure; (3) visible components of the education system; (4) unequal education funding and resources; and (5) the efficacy of education reform efforts.

FINDINGS

I. TWO DOMINANT DISCOURSES

Although the focus group discussions were broad and fairly wide-ranging, when focus group participants were asked to discuss their viewpoints about the state of education today, there were two dominant discourses that directed all other topics within the discussion: **1) Education is Essential to Individual Achievement and 2) the Education System as a Sinking Ship.** On the one hand, education was viewed as extremely important for the future of individual children and was seen as intrinsically valuable. As one participant stated, "Ignorance is dangerous…Education is a universal good as far as I am concerned. You can't be too educated" (Vermont, White, High Ed). At the same time, there was also a great deal of frustration over the current state of education and discussions often centered on the problems that plague American

schools. At worst, people felt that "the whole system is screwed up and failed" (Baltimore, African-American, High Ed) and at best, that schools were not as effective as they could (or should be) at preparing all children to be successful. It is important to note that both discourses tend to devolve discussion of the importance of individual achievement and do not automatically lead to considerations of the importance of education for the nation.

1. Education is Essential to Individual Achievement. Participants were unequivocal in their affirmation of the value of education and a large portion of the discourse in the focus groups revolved around the value of education for individuals. At the most basic level, education was seen as essential for helping to convey a set of necessary skills for daily living, ordering priorities, and for social inclusion. Participants also almost universally agreed that education provides children with the knowledge, skills, and ability to work and be self-sufficient. In this way, education was seen as a vehicle for individual achievement and social mobility. As one participant stated:

> I definitely think we need to invest in our future, and our future is our kids, and if the education system isn't there then how are our kids going to grow up to be plumbers or politicians or lawyers or doctors?" (New Hampshire, White, Low Ed).

Another summed it up simply by saying, "It's the key to success" (Indianapolis, Mixed Race, Low Ed).

It is important to note that discussion about the value of education for individuals did not completely eclipse the notion of education as a value to society. Participants had lengthy discussions of the importance of education to the future of the nation and these discussions were especially ripe when conversations were primed with notions of economic and global competitiveness.

From a framing standpoint, the ability of focus group participants to see a broader role for education in the context of our international competitiveness is a promising area for lifting up more systems-level thinking and shifting the education discussion away from individuals and individual-level outcomes. As a result, after consistently hearing a decidedly more collectivist orientation in the discussion of competitiveness in the first iterations of the focus groups, we purposefully primed subsequent focus groups with the Value of "common good." In other words, we intentionally introduced the idea of education for the "common good" of society and then asked focus group participants to discuss the state of education and its role in keeping the United States *competitive* with other nations.

While a good discussion of the public purposes of education ensued in most of the groups, the perception that the United States has fallen dramatically behind other nations in terms of educating the next generation emerged consistently and trumped the potential of 'common good' to lift collective thinking. As participants explained:

> [H]istorically right now, math and science in the United States stinks. All the other countries in the world are doing great in this stuff. (New Hampshire, White, Low Ed)

> I think education today is kind of a "joke" compared to other countries. (Indianapolis, Mixed Race, Low Ed)

So, although Common Good as a Value tended to lift thinking about the collective, or social, impact of education to the forefront of people's thinking, discussing Common Good in the context of global competitiveness caused participants to focus on concerns about how this critically important social institution was not accomplishing its goal. To put it more simply, "education as collective resource" devolved into "education failure."

2. The Educational System as a Sinking Ship. Consistent with our cultural models interviews, few participants voiced the opinion that "everything is working fine" (Sacramento, Mixed Race, Low Ed); rather, the vast majority made it clear that they viewed the educational system as an intractable failure – a failure still in deteriorating freefall.

The fact that the American public discourse on education focuses heavily on the notion of failure is not surprising or particularly illuminating given our past research on education and other social issues. What is illuminating and important from a framing perspective is that, while participants repeated the mantra that the education *system* was broken and getting worse, their discussion of *why* the system was broken centered on *individuals* – mostly teachers, students, and parents. That is, while participants clearly accessed the language of *systems* in discussing the failure of schools to educate children, when asked about the reasons and responsibility for these failures, participant discussions focused on a small set of circumscribed *individual* actors within those systems. Thus, in the discourse on the state of education in the United States, attribution of responsibility for the failures of education system was placed squarely on the shoulders of the parent/student/teacher triad.

II. PARTICIPANT EXPLANATIONS FOR SYSTEM FAILURE

1. Family as the Foundation or Family Bubble. Participants were frustrated with "bad" parents and their contribution to the failing educational system. The family was often referred to as the "foundation" for children, and the comment that "it starts at home" was a common reprise in focus group discussions.

> [T]hey become distant from listening to the teachers, they are not respecting their parents at home, and getting in and out of trouble…[Prison] is where they are going to end up if they don't have a solid education or a good foundation at home. But the parents need to step up, too. They can't expect the teachers to take care of everything. (New Hampshire, White, Low Ed)

From this more mentalist orientation, parents are primarily responsible for providing a foundation for educational achievement and schools are responsible for *maintaining* this foundation. From this vantage point - bad parents who fail to discipline their children, institute strong morals and values, and actively engage in promoting their children's success, fall short of building a foundation for schools to maintain, which then causes the *system* to fail. In this way, causality flows from individuals to systems.

> So you got to start at home, and then we start looking at what the teachers can do to improve upon that and…coming from the old school, we didn't have very much, but we got the principles of life. If you want to succeed you got to work, and if you got to go to school, be attentive, if you gonna get your lessons, you got to behave. So those principles

got to be instilled in order to see a successful school system. (Memphis, African American, High Ed)

Moreover, as articulated by focus group participants, these "bad" parents have a negative impact on other parts of the system – especially on their children's peers and teachers. In particular, the schools are saddled with unmotivated and disrespectful children who detract from the learning experience of others in the classroom, making it difficult if not impossible to attract and retain competent teachers.

2. Selfish Teachers. Participants also talked about "good" teachers as necessary to the educational success of children and characterized those teachers as naturally caring, motivated, and motivational. The problem, as focus group participants expressed, is that teachers are less caring and more selfish than they used to be—they are less likely to stay after school to help students, and so forth. As one participant stated:

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

Participants ascribed the demise of caring and motivation from teachers as being the result of a wide variety of factors that ran the gamut from teachers' pure selfishness and the bad students they are required to teach, to the negative effects of unions and school board policies that pay teachers little and strip them of their autonomy and creativity as they're forced to "teach to the tests."

Two points of discovery are particularly important to mention here. First, from our cultural models interviews, it was clear that people viewed successful teachers as the product of natural, innate factors and "personality" rather than of good training and professional preparation. Even so, we were struck by how negative the public discourse proved to be with respect to teachers and how viral this viewpoint tended to be (that is, how easily participants "signed onto" this negative talk). Second, it was in this explicitly negative discussion of teachers that a larger discussion about the context in which teachers work (in schools and within policies set by school boards) seemed to emerge. In this respect, the antipathy about teachers seemed, ironically to *encourage* some productive thinking about the importance of strong institutional leadership and creative "environments" for teachers.

3. The Lack of Discipline. Participants also spoke *ad infinitum* about the lack of discipline and motivation among students, teachers, and parents as underlying causes of school failure. Fundamental to these viewpoints was a nostalgic lament about the loss of strong morals and values in American society today. Participants had lively discussions about the notion that parents no longer discipline their children effectively and that schools are unable to do so because teachers have been stripped of their authority and roles as disciplinarians. Participants talked about how "out-of-control kids are nowadays," how teachers feel threatened by them, and how they (speaking as parents and citizens) are disempowered to do anything about it:

> Not being backed up by the parents, and being limited in how you can discipline the kids in the schools these days. I'm sure back in the old days you got a little whack on the knuckles, and the rules now—[teachers] can't even say something to you without being sued, you know. (New Hampshire, White, Low Ed)

> So much of what we learned in terms of family, community, and neighborhood values would, in a lot of respects, be considered child abuse by today's standards. (Sacramento, Latino, High Ed)

These discussions often triggered nostalgic reminiscence of days when knuckles were rapped and children were beaten for acting up in school. As another respondent explained, "We didn't have no Ritalin," to which another added "The only thing we had was a belt" (Baltimore, African American, Low Ed). Today, participants concluded, children lack the proper moral guidance, which results in poor behavior. The very standardized rhetoric participants used was that if children knew how to act and if teachers could instill values, schools would be less disruptive, school environments would be less violent, children would be better able to learn and many of the problems with the current system would simply disappear.

We find many similarities here to FrameWorks findings from other research topics that revealed consistent mentalist patterns of thinking. In this way of thinking, outcomes and problems ultimately come down to individual problems with motivation and personal discipline. What was especially illuminating in these focus groups, and enlightening in how Americans think about education, is that the tie that binds the parents/teachers/students triad is the lack of discipline and motivation. That is, of the three actors in the educational system most readily visible and accessible to people in talking about education, all were characterized as essentially having the same problem – a lack of strong discipline and the internal fortitude to do what is necessary to promote academic achievement.

A second point of discovery that emerged from the discourse on discipline and motivation in the focus groups is the extent to which this discourse seemed to be inextricably connected to two others. First and foremost, the discourse on the lack of discipline and motivation was linked to a related discourse about the lack of ethics and morals. So intricately woven were these two discourses that the failure to exhibit discipline and motivation was tantamount to the failure to act in an ethically or morally appropriate way. So in this sense, discipline and motivation were mere "stand-ins" for ethics and morality; to lack discipline in effectively teaching students, for example, is unethical. A second discourse (centered on the cultural model of "yesterday" or the notion that the best times are always behind us) also seemed to be consistently bundled inside the former.

III. VISIBLE COMPONENTS OF THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Despite the fact that focus group discussions typically centered on mentalist aspects of children's educational experiences—issues of discipline and motivation—there were important points where more systems level deliberations emerged – either organically or with the help of some purposeful priming. In this part of the report, we elaborate on those components of the educational system that seemed to be more visible and apparent to focus group participants—

elements of the system that they *were* able to discuss, explain and connect to other educational issues.

1. Education Policies and Programs. Focus group participants devoted much discussion to what they deemed to be the "ineffective" educational policies and programs that characterize most schools. One of the most common complaints was about *ineffective curricula* considered to be unchallenging, inadequate, inflexible, and/or too focused on testing and rote learning. Oft-cited as proof were anecdotes about people who graduated from high school without being able to read, as well as fast food workers who could not make change for customers. Sharing their distress over student ignorance and lack of basic skills, participants offered the following:

> Getting a diploma is a piece of paper. What did you *learn* with that diploma? Can you *read*? Can you *add and/or subtract* your own checking account? Because I know a couple of high schoolers that can't do that. (Indianapolis, Mixed Race, Low Ed)

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

Though expressed in various ways, participants communicated their perception that education should be *individualized* for children, but isn't; they are on an educational conveyor belt where schools are mandated to push them through the system, whether or not they have learned, or whether or not the education provided fits the students' needs. Participants explained:

> A lot of times they just pass the kids on, and a lot of the work is easy to some and the others, they could care less if they get it or not. (Memphis, African American, High Ed)

> The students kind of get pushed along, you know. It's like a system, and they don't, like, personalize on a personal level with every individual like they should be doing. (Boston, Mixed Race, Mixed Ed)

> It's failing in "individualizing" the education. It is just maybe our population is so large, especially in certain areas. The schools are really crowded, and it's really hard to get that individual mentoring kind of relationship (Vermont, White, High Ed)

Importantly, participants characterized the curricula as inherently ineffective because everyone is forced to go through the same process regardless of individual differences in skills, abilities or proclivities between children. It was also argued, again consistent with our cultural models interviews, that the students at the extremes (high achieving and special needs) get all of the attention and resources, while the rest in the middle are, as the participant below noted, "left behind" (and therefore added to that perpetually inflexible and unresponsive educational conveyor belt):

> [I]f you are a really gifted, really bright student, you can do okay. If you are really on the opposite end, someone who tends to get into trouble and have issues, they have programs for those. The kids that are "normal" probably, you know, B, B+ students, are getting left

behind. I don't think the programs are geared for them any longer. (Vermont, White, High Ed)

One might reasonably expect that this assessment of a lack of individualized curricula would lead to changes more in keeping with curricular innovation. By contrast, this lack of confidence in the educational curriculum triggered the call for schools to go *"back to the basics."* The problem, people believed was that in spite of changes or "reforms" to the school system, children seem to be learning less and less, finishing their education without acquiring basic skills like reading, writing and arithmetic. The reasoning underlying this "back to the basics" mantra is that schools must not be teaching the basics, and further, whatever they are currently doing has replaced the development of basic educational skills. This reasoning reflects the zero-sum thinking about education and educational resources found in the previous research—— in which there is only so much education to go around and any innovation must be "purchased" at the expense of a basic skill. As one participant stated, "I think we have just wandered away from basic hard education, thinking that a lot of fancy window dressings suddenly creates a better educational system, and it doesn't" (Boston Mixed Race, Mixed Ed).

The other most common complaint about educational policy was that there has been a *loss of support for teachers* ranging from a lack of teacher training to the loss of teachers' pedagogical autonomy and creativity, to their loss of authority to discipline students, to the large numbers of students they are required to teach. As participants explained:

> They are so worried about the performance on the test that the teachers, you know, have to follow the strict program that doesn't even allow them to deviate from that and do the things they really want to teach. (New Hampshire, White, High Ed)

> There is no support forum in the field of teaching, you know…and when teachers go into schools, you know, I think they generally want to do a good job…but they run into so many roadblocks, and they don't get the support they need, so the field of teaching, for that reason, is a lot less than it used to be. (Baltimore, Mixed Race, Mixed Ed)

Within the discussion of school policies, "sketchiness" of participant knowledge of programs and curricula are key points of discovery. First, while participants talked in a fairly animated fashion whenever the subject of school curricula came up (particularly when they recited their examples of students who couldn't read or make change but had managed to get a diploma), few knew anything specific about the types of curricula typically taught in schools today nor the types of programs generally offered to students. They assumed that, since children didn't seem to be interested or particularly successful in school, whatever programs were being offered were ineffective and therefore deficient.   Second, on a topic that should have naturally invited more systems level discussion, participants *individualized* their proposals for reform (i.e. solving the perceived curriculum problem with individualized learning plans for students). So, even when participants started at the systems level (talking about policies, procedures, curricula), they ended up at individual level solutions and suggestions for change. As a result, their ability to see the *systems* part of the educational achievement equation did not lead them organically to see systemic solutions.

2. Where the Family Bubble Ends, Schools Begin.   Although focus group participants expected parents to provide the foundation necessary for their children to thrive in school, they understood that not all parents can (or are willing to) provide this prerequisite. More importantly, when parents cannot provide (or choose not to provide) such a foundation, focus group participants expressed the expectation that schools assume the brunt of this responsibility.

What was particularly interesting, as a point of discovery on this issue, was that participants expressed a role for schools quite beyond the traditional educational sphere. That is, in addition to things like keeping parents informed of important aspects of their children's development, participants also discussed the role of schools in efforts such as providing educational opportunities and information for families as a whole. This included classes on parenting, English language proficiency, money management, health and nutrition, health care resources, after school resources for children, and so forth. Explaining this complex relationship, participants stated:

> [O]bviously, the most important thing is the foundation of the home whether it be a broken family or an intact family. You have to invest in the kids…but you know what, there has to be more. I don't know, education for the families, too, in some ways, I think. (New Hampshire, White, Low Ed)

> I think it goes both ways. It is both parents and the schools, you know. There is enough blame to go around…You can have parents that do the best they can with the pressures they are under in society today, working and all, but once their kids go to school it has got to be a good school. It's got to be a school with teachers that are willing to teach them (Baltimore, Mixed Race, Mixed Ed)

> [Y]ou want the school to help the parent to help that child. (Vermont, White, Low Ed)

And while there was plenty of dissention in the groups whenever this issue emerged, the disagreement seemed to be about *who* was best positioned to play the supporting role for parents in this regard (schools versus churches, community groups, extended family, etc.), *not if* there should be a supporting partner. As a result, there was some recognition (albeit begrudgingly acknowledged) that parents are only one part of the educational achievement equation.

While it was clear from these discussions that participants were able to see a role for schools beyond the traditional sphere of educating children, it was also clear that (1) the schools were assigned a role of last resort; (2) parents were still considered to be the active change agent (that is, schools were thought to fix, rescue or resource parents); and (3) there was no consensus about whether there should be a precise dividing line between families and schools in terms of their responsibilities to children and what sort of resources and supports should be on either side of the line. With regard to the latter, as discussed in the next section of the report, once the issue of funding was introduced (i.e. who would pay for these resources and supports), support among participants for expanding the role of schools diminished to some extent.

IV. UNEQUAL EDUCATION FUNDING AND RESOURCES

Inequality was a very strong and recurrent topic of discussion throughout the focus groups—revealing a discourse that focused on systems. Participants expressed frustration with the abundance of quality educational environments, resources, courses, and qualified teachers in wealthy schools and districts, while those in poor areas were left without what they needed. In almost universal agreement, participants asserted that all children should have an equal opportunity to succeed but expressed frustration over the failure of "government" to provide a high quality education to all students. While this discrepancy was most often discussed in terms of income, differences by race (often coded in terms of place—"urban" or "inner city") were also raised. Participants explained:

> In areas of the country where there is more money, the school districts are fine. In the inner cities and sometimes in areas of the country where the property taxes can't fund the education, then it doesn't work as well…So you can't say necessarily that it is all fail or succeed. It just kind of depends on where you are, and unfortunately, it is connected to the economics of the area because of property tax. (Boston, Mixed Race, Mixed Ed)

> [School success] depends on where you live and what the color of your skin is. (Baltimore, African American, High Ed)

> I just see a lot of disparity between school districts, between schools, between classes. (Vermont, White, Low Ed)

> Because education shouldn't be just for those that can afford it….We want everyone to be having the same opportunities so they will be educated. (Vermont, White, High Ed)

> I think that it is succeeding for the haves, and maybe failing for the have nots. (Sacramento, Latino, High Ed)

After consistently hearing this refrain from participants in the first iteration of the focus groups, we decided to prime subsequent groups with the Value of Common Good." Having observed the power of Common Good to motivate better thinking in FrameWorks' past research on government, we speculated that problems in systems thinking might be remedied by more explicit priming for public purpose and common good. Our thinking was that public purpose was often latent in the discourses we observed but not sufficiently developed for participants to use this idea in supporting public policies. We therefore decided to see if more explicit priming would encourage support.[8]

While Common Good in discussion of public funding did not "lift all boats," it did emerge largely intact from the discourse. In other words, while Common Good did not get participants away from an individualist perspective in their discussions of all issues, priming the groups with this value did lead to an acknowledgement of the public purpose of education. For example, after a discussion about education as a common good, one man with a strong initial individualist

---

[8] For a more in-depth examination of our government related work, see
http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/government.html.

perspective explained that his children were schooled partially at home and partially in private institutions. He continued however by stating (albeit reluctantly) why his tax dollars were still usefully employed in the public school system:

> "I don't believe in our public education. My taxes still go to it. I don't like it, but there is not much I can do about it, *and there is a public good that has to be served.*"
> (Indianapolis, Mixed Race, High Ed)

As a separate point, we noted that discussions of funding had a nuanced effect on systems thinking. Interestingly, the discussion of funding for programs and services in schools had a narrowing effect on most issues in focus group *except* when discussed in the context of inequality *between* schools. That is, when funding needs were framed from the vantage point of inequality and shoring up the gaps left by unequal funding across schools, participants more readily espoused support, but when those same funding needs were framed simply as "who will pay for them," the discussion narrowed dramatically and support was noticeably more tentative.

Society's Misplaced Priorities and the Impact on Educational Systems. Several of the focus groups had rigorous discussions that criticized "misplaced priorities" of society (in general and of the government in particular) when it comes to education. Those misplaced priorities, participants argued, are reflected in low teacher pay compared to other occupations, and stronger investments in things like sports teams, entertainment, and military, than in schools. They explained:

> We pay entertainers more money than we pay educators and teachers. (Baltimore, African American, Low Ed)

> [W]e want this big team to come here…we will build another facility, but we can't educate our kids, we are going to cut teachers, and cut services. (Memphis, African American High Ed)

> [S]ometimes teachers go out of their way to even take money out of their own pocket and buy stuff for the classroom. The schools will not supply them. (New Hampshire, White, Low Ed)

This lack of investment in education was often discussed in terms of children lacking books, teachers having to pay for basic supplies out of pocket, and activities getting cut while stadiums are built and wars are waged.

Several additional points of discovery emerged from the discourse on school resources, funding, and inequality (as a bundled set). First and foremost, almost all participants seemed energized when the issue of inequality of resources was raised. Not only was the topic clearly viral (spreading easily within the groups) but there were no dissenters to the universal characterization of inequality as a "bad thing for America." Another point of discovery in the context of thinking about the inequality of resources across schools and students was that discussions of teachers became much more positive. That is, teachers were seen as rather heroic once participants considered their attempts to fill-in the gap left by funding misallocations. Third, focus group participants placed responsibility for the inequality of resources squarely on the shoulders of government, rather than on private industry, broader economic forces, or

communities. Thus, to the extent that we take on this part of the discourse for reframing, we may need to address its connection as a conjoined discourse on government. A fourth point of discovery revolved around the Common Good prime. Once primed in a Common Good direction, participants were able to see more of a role for themselves (even when they were resistant to realizing this role) in shoring up a system that provides education as a resource to all Americans. And finally, only in the African American groups did participants explicitly mention racial inequalities when talking about the disparities in public school funding. Other groups did discuss this issue but did so in more "coded" terms (as discussed above) to specifically avoid igniting discussions of race.

V. THE EFFICACY OF EDUCATION REFORM EFFORTS

Participant discussions of education reform efforts and the way they viewed attempts at education reform were nuanced and complex. On the one hand, participants were able to articulate some key structural problems such as unequal resources and ineffective curricula – problems for which they could foresee the necessity of governmental action. On the other hand, their discussions of systems or structural level reforms were fairly shallow, narrowly circumscribed, and subjugated by their individual or family level solutions to these problems. In fact, as discussed previously, most of the time when they used the language of *systems* to talk about problems, they ended up with individual level reforms. For example, proposing that all schools adopt individualized learning plans for all students.

Why is it problematic when the language of "systems" devolves to "individual" level reforms? Cultural models theory suggests that while people can *recognize* the value of collective action, the deep and dominant patterns of thinking that Americans use to *understand* their social worlds tend to emphasize the role of the individual in society (i.e. American rugged individualism) and of families (i.e. the Family Bubble). These cultural models, therefore, make it much easier to think about education reform solutions from individual and family vantage points even though we can acknowledge more structural or systemic problems. In other words, while Americans can *recognize* some systemic causes related to education, existent cultural models make individual and family level solutions more cognitively rewarding and easier to think.

In addition to this cultural models explanation, our work on education strongly conveyed three other related but equally resilient forces that explain the tendency to generate individual level solutions for what some recognized as systems-level problems: feelings of disempowerment in relation to schools systems, a general lack of agency, and a perceived social distance from reform efforts.

Participants frequently expressed feelings of disempowerment in their discussions of education. The education system was seen as disempowering to children, families, and communities. For some, it was that schools don't allow the reinforcement of certain family and religious values or that the school is too inflexible to accommodate a child's creativity or individual needs, while for others it was that schools do not effectively communicate information to parents, or that they provide substandard resources and environments for children and communities. Most of all, as focus group participants articulated, schools do not provide students (except those at the

extremes of ability) with the needed skills and knowledge to be good leaders, productive citizens, and successful in life.

This disempowerment is a driving force in the mentalist ways of thinking about education reform. Participants tended to begin their discussions from the position that "the system" is going to be unfair and ineffective, or at best, perpetually in need of improvement, intrinsically flawed, problematic, and inflexible. These characteristics were taken as "givens" in the discourse, requiring little debate, negotiation or discussion. Moreover, because these structural and systemic problems appear to be entrenched and unchanging, participants believed that simply complaining about them would do little to help their children. From this vantage point, "life is not always fair, and nothing is going to be perfect," so it is up to each individual to put power into his or her own hands to effect change. As participants explained:

> [I]t takes parents to yell and scream and fuss and write letters to certain people to get this thing together, but we don't want to do it. (Memphis, African American, Low Ed)

> It is a combination of things that determine why our system is failing, and until people stop pointing a finger and say, what can I do to make it better, it is not going to get better. (Indianapolis, Mixed Race, Low Ed)

The focus group participants explicitly saw success for children in school as an intrinsic issue of agency and empowerment. That is, they believed that, even if all "the right things" were being done at the systemic level, parents still have to fight against the backdrop of other opposing and disempowering forces to ensure the academic success of their children. Moreover, the success of parents in this "fight" was seen as a somewhat heroic battle that would serve as an important exemplar for their children. To do anything less than strike this heroic pose would evoke feelings of helplessness:

> [T]hat is what I mean by empowering our children. If we can show them the value of what they are learning, and what that can do for them, then they will be more interested and will be more motivated to really learn. (Indianapolis, Latino, Mixed Ed)

> If my child is not getting it then I need to do something to change that situation. Be it work with them or move them or whatever. It is the parents. (Memphis, African American, Low Ed)

The causal sequence articulated here was from the following highly mentalist perspective: if your child is not getting what he/she needs, it means that you and your child are not doing all that can be done. Interestingly enough, focus group participants saw no limit to the levers parents (and their families) were expected to wield such as: (1) providing their children with the motivation and work ethic to succeed in spite of the odds, (2) advocating on their behalf for something better, (3) providing them with extra help and school guidance at home, and, if a family has enough resources, (4) removing them from public systems altogether in favor of private schools or home schooling. Mentalist reasoning, then, was sometimes favored because thinking at the systems or materialist level seemed unproductive, unrealistic, and frustrating – especially when there are so many powerful and palpable levers at the family and individual's disposure.

Participants expressed the view that, although any number of special programs or reform ideas have been implemented in particular schools or districts, those changes (most marginal changes, tinkering at the edges) have done little to provide equal opportunity for all children or to provide children in some places with the education resources they need to thrive. Moreover, because the structural problems are so entrenched, participants ended up commiserating about the day to day problems of educating young people, and what individuals—parents, students, and teachers— could and should do to maximize the likelihood of success within a failing educational system and a static political environment. That is, participants saw much more potential for social change and agency where *they* were *proximate* reformers – where the responsibility for change rests within their own spheres of influence – teachers, parents, and children and where the social distance between them and the agents of change, is minimal.

The challenge, then, is to effectively broaden people's thinking about the possibility for, and the necessity of, affecting systemic change and to do so in the context of the enormous barriers raised by the existing cultural models, participants' own feelings of disempowerment in relation to schools, lack of agency, and the perceived social distance from education reform efforts.

What Schools "Should" Look Like. Anticipating many of these same barriers, as evidenced by the cultural models interviews, FrameWorks researchers initiated a set of exercises meant to widen the lens through which participants typically approached notions of education reform. In particular, we wanted to give the participants the opportunity to think outside of their own social sphere (proximity) and outside of their own station (agency). So, after discussing their frustrations with everything from unmotivated teachers to ineffective curriculum to patterns of decline in morals and values, we asked participants to envision their ideal schools and put in front of them lists of a wide range of actors directly and indirectly involved in educating children. In this way, we "primed" the discourse by interjecting other parts of the educational system that had been largely missing into the discussion. While reforms at the school *system* level were "hard to think" and the problems of disempowerment, agency, and proximity discussed above made participants less willing to venture into substantive discussion at this level, when participants were given a broader range of actors who play parts in the educational system, as well as the opportunity to brainstorm with one another about what an ideal *school should* look like, they were quite receptive and able to envision a much broader range of school reforms and policies.

Given the penchant for talking about reform at the individual level—using the dominant models discussed above and in our report from the cultural models interviews[9], it should come as little surprise that there was still (even after priming) a great deal of talk about parental involvement, discipline and motivation. Even so, the primed discussions also included more materialist suggestions. These ranged widely from making classrooms smaller and giving principals more control over the hiring and firing of teachers, to having community members take a role in choosing teachers and staff, creating an environmentally green school with an emphasis on nutrition and health (among other things), having a school where there is a strong emphasis on outside the classroom field experiences, shortening the school day significantly while extending

---

[9] Chart, H. and N. Kendall-Taylor. "Reform What?: Individualist Thinking in Education: American Cultural Models on Schooling," Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute 2008.

the school year, having an opt out option for life skills education, having a variety of vocational-technical school options available to all students, having various types of incentives for students and teachers, having community member mentors, having after school programs and tutoring as part of school programming, promoting students by ability instead of by age and grade, and having schools function as large community centers for parents, children, and others where not only education, but all sorts of community services are offered. In other words, the scope of policy options was greatly broadened and extended by giving participants the opportunity to think outside of their own social location and station. Some examples of the ideal schools developed by focus group participants are described in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Selected Illustrations of "Ideal" Schools Developed by Focus Group Participants			
Focus Group Dynamic	**School Name**	**School Mission**	**Reform Priorities**
Baltimore, African American, High Ed	Citizens High School	To liberate the mind through quality and effective education, achieve equal and quality education, and educate our students effectively	Driven and experienced teachers, challenging curricula, have quality control, strong PTA, good learning environment—small and comfortable classes, effective reward program for students and teachers, community involvement, diversity among students and teachers, extracurricular activities/physical fitness
New Hampshire, White, Low Ed	Challenge Academy	To provide an exemplary education geared toward today's world, while maintaining and stressing the importance and impact of respect for self and others, while ensuring students and staff are aware of expectations	Uniforms—dress code, earned levels of self-expression; mandatory parental involvement; repercussions for actions suitable to offense; ROTC; FBLA (Future Business Leaders of America); FFA (Future Farmers of America); fluid learning styles—geared to child's needs and level of motivation ☺ (smiley face theirs)
Boston, Mixed Race, Mixed Ed	School of the Future—Elementary, middle and high school	Well rounded; diverse; global citizen. Well prepared, ready for the next century. Up to date with use of technology. Citizenship, social skills, fundamentals and technology	New building. State of art Green—LEED certified—solar/wind —high tech (fully loaded); healthy; sport, music, arts complex (year round); emergency preparedness; community center; foreign language in kindergarten required; internships required; community service required; year round schedule; no tenure; incentive program; open enrollment; parental contract
Vermont, White, High Ed	Community School of Practicality	To deliver the best education available to the community	More hands on, less theory, more practical education, smaller class sizes
Baltimore, Mixed Race, Mixed Ed	Our School	Educate, motivate, encourage creative growth	Elementary PreK-6 with uniforms; Sept.-May; 9-3pm; Teach basic principles and life skills; lead by example; good teachers with good morals; offer the arts—music, art, shop, dance; parent participation; good communications

What is also interesting in the ideal schools in Figure 1 is the frequent disconnect between missions and the reforms participants selected to realize the goals of their schools. Participants often stressed a holistic approach to education in their mission, with emphasis on affective aspects of learning. By contrast, the reforms deemed pertinent to those missions were often punitive, narrow, basic and essentially conservative. This may speak to a fundamental misunderstanding about how to achieve progressive goals, not problems with support for the goals themselves.

While from group to group participants discussed a wide range of specific ideas about reform, several broad themes emerged within prompted as well as unprompted discussions about needed changes to schools.

Same Offerings, Different Choices. There was a strong consensus among focus group participants that every school and child should have access to the same curricular offerings, but that all students should be provided with a range of different choices, opportunities, and experiences to create an education that meets and develops individual needs and interests. Participants expressed frustration that only certain groups of children (eg: high achieving or wealthy) have access to specialized or advanced educational programs:

> [W]hat if you live on the other side of town and can't get to that school? [Advanced curriculum] should be offered in every school. (Memphis, African American, High Ed)

> [T]here should be a variety of opportunities for the children to learn up and beyond the basics, and everybody—you know, if one school has a drill team, everybody should have a drill team type of thing, or the opportunity at least (Sacramento, Mixed Race, High Ed)

> People should have the "option" to go into [a trade]. It just doesn't seem as if there as many good options for going into vocational training as there could be, and so in essence people are failing in that sense. (Vermont, White, High Ed)

Participants voiced concern that not all students have the option to take advanced placement or vocational courses, and that no child should be forced to fit into one, inflexible mold that may or may not be a reflection of that child's needs, abilities or interests. This stemmed from concerns that inequality and inflexibility in education have, in part, led to its ineffectiveness. As one participant stated:

> [T]here are centers for various vocational types of education as well as academic education there, and I think if you capture a person or a student's interest then they are going to give you a lot more than you can get from putting them into a category where they have no control over them. (Indianapolis, Mixed Race, Low Ed)

Resistance to the idea of universal college preparation (especially before high school) emerged from this call for a more individualized, flexible, and equally accessible educational curriculum. While very popular among education advocates today, participants overwhelmingly argued that although everyone should have the opportunity to go to college if that is their choice, they should be *given the choice whether or not they wished to pursue this path*. From this perspective, college is not a viable option for everyone, so why force everyone down that path? A few

participants even argued that using resources for universal preparation was wasteful and inefficient because there are so many who do not go on. They explained:

> [N]ot everyone wants to go to college. (Sacramento, Mixed Race, High Ed)

> It is a big help, but you don't want to tell brothers that *you have to go to college,* because then maybe his path is somewhere else. (Memphis, African American, Low Ed)

> [S]o if you were to go ahead and provide more vocational training, then that can be part of the education system and people can come out actually being able to get a job and fill a need in society. (Vermont, White, High Ed)

The focus on college was seen by many to work to the detriment of those who do not want to go to college. In this way, universal college preparation was seen to dissuade individuals from pursuing vocational fields that may interest them and force these individuals to take classes that they find neither interesting nor engaging. In addition, participants argued that, unlike trade schools, college often leaves students without specific skills and unprepared to get a job.

Education as Creative and Fun. Participants argued that if education were less about rote memorization and "teaching to the test" and were more fun, creative, hands on, and experiential, children would be motivated and excited about learning. In multiple focus group sessions, participants suggested using a pizza to teach fractions as an example of the ways children should be learning in school. They explained:

> The numbers, the tests don't mean anything to the kids, and I think that they are teaching incorrectly. You can teach anybody anything if you make it fun, and they are not having any fun where the teachers and everybody is all worried about the exams and everything. I think if you want to teach fractions, buy the class pizza. Cut up the pizza and they will figure out fractions a lot faster than they will sitting at a table. (New Hampshire, White, High Ed)

> Incorporate something that would grab their attention because if you have somebody that is going on and on and on, you might look at them, but you're like, what did they say? (Memphis, African American, Low Ed)

Children, they argued, need a reason to *want* to come to school. Note that this way of thinking may be strongly influenced by mentalist assumptions that schools are failing because of lack of student motivation and effort. Interestingly, however, in making education fun, responsibility was placed squarely on the system, rather than the individual.

Back to Basics, AND. Dealing with what they experienced as entrenched educational ineffectiveness, participants were concerned that in spite of all the changes being made to schools, no matter what "reforms" continued to cycle in and out of style from year to year, children seemed to be learning less than they did before—that is, students are not only graduating without advanced skills, but they are graduating without even the most basic skills. However, when discussing this issue in the context of an ideal school, and viewing themselves in the position of reformer, participants were able to think more productively about the issue of basic and advanced skills. They discussed teaching the basics *along with* (vs. to the exclusion

of) other skills like teamwork and creativity as vital to children's success in the 21st century. It should be noted that people do not "normally" see themselves as systems reformers; it was only when we asked them to create their ideal schools that creative thinking about the prospects for and effects of reform emerged.

In all, the exercises which gave each participant the opportunity to envision schools and school reform outside of his/her own social location and outside of their own station, helped enormously to spark more innovative thinking. The fact that this kind of thinking only emerged once participants had been given "permission" in the exercises to think optimistically, creatively, and less disparagingly about the prospect of school reform efforts constitutes an important point of discovery. Once we got participants over this hurdle, some were able to think about the points of synthesis between schools, policies, programs, families, and students. In the words of one participant:

> [T]he school is sort of this synthesis between kids, families, and the school department, and if they are not in sync with each other, they don't get the great product, but you need all three to be there. You need the parents to be there, and you need the money and the guidance from the school system, and we need the kids to work hard. (Boston, Mixed Race, Mixed Ed)

THE BROADER CHALLENGE IN EVOKING SYSTEMS-LEVEL THINKING

In our attempt to get participants to think *even more* deeply about education and school reform efforts, we introduced an additional series of primes. Our intent was to experiment with primes that had emerged in the initial set of focus group discussions as potentially useful as well as to try other primes that have proven successful in past FrameWorks research on a variety of social issues.

At various points in the focus groups, participants were primed with some combination of the following values: education for the common good, preparedness (for the 21st century), equal opportunity, accountability, global competitiveness, community responsibility, supportive partnerships (between homes and schools), well roundedness, and healthy environments. Short passages that captured the essence of these concepts were shared and discussed. In addition, we incorporated a more extensive prime on child development to see if it could move people's thinking on education beyond the narrow confines of academic basics.

Primes that Moved Discourse in Promising Directions

1. Equality of Opportunity. Primed or unprimed, discussions about inequality of resources (e.g.: buildings, programs, books) and the unequal educational opportunity this creates, tended to move people's attention off of individual responsibility - this was true primarily when discussed in the context of monetary resources and inequality of funding. Priming participants to think about the equality of funding was strongly associated with discussions that consistently emphasized the importance of systems, environments, and programs:

[I]t doesn't matter how much parent involvement you have—and that can take you but so far. The bottom line is, if you don't have a desk, if you don't have a book, if you don't have notebooks and pencils, that puts a whole different perspective on education, and then there are some areas that are just very wealthy, and everything is given to the student. (Baltimore, African American, High Ed)

[T]he big factor in terms of funding problems is, you've always had an unfair sharing of those budgetary resources that are provided for education, and aren't, in California, those resources primarily based on property taxes? Don't we find richer neighborhoods with better schools, better resources, better payrolls for teachers and administrators, and better results, and fewer consequences? (Sacramento, Latino, High Ed)

I don't know about public education outside of Massachusetts in the sense of how they fund it, but we have a problem with not being able to provide the same facility, the same quality of teaching, the same quality of facility, the same educational programs depending upon whether or not we are rich town or a poor town. (Boston, Mixed Race, Mixed Ed)

2. Education for the Common Good of Society. When participants were primed to talk about education as a necessary public service, they tended to move away from dead-end discussion of the need to educate individual and what individuals need to do to be successful, in favor of a pattern of discussion that emphasized the need to educate the collective whole and the negative impact on society when the system fails to provide most citizens with a high quality education. As one person explained:

Society as a whole benefits from having a well educated populace. You know we all benefit from our fellow neighbors being educated. If they are educated, they are more likely to have their jobs, contribute more to society, more to the economy. We all benefit from that, so. (Sacramento, Latino, High Ed)

Due to the negativity associated with the perceived inability of schools to carry out education for the common good, as discussed in this report, the Common Good discussions of solutions often led in unproductive directions. It may be unrealistic to expect any single frame element to plug all of the cognitive holes necessary to support a robust reform discourse. While Common Good was successful in creating a more positive discussion of the goals and purposes of education, it was less than effective in shifting discussions to the ability of systems level solutions to educational problems. In this respect, the Common Good value may need to be refined to avoid this kind of trap but is nonetheless, a good bet for one component among other reframing elements.

3. Global Competitiveness and Preparedness (for the 21st century*)***. These two values were seen as directly related to one another—that is, if you are prepared for the 21st century, you are competitive globally. When primed with these values (in the context of being additional to, not in replacement of, the basics) participants tended to discuss needs and skills beyond people's general knowledge such as facility with computers and technology and a mastery of foreign languages:

[W]e import a lot of foreign people who—the technology—they are on the cutting edge, so we import them into our country every year. So why can't we grow our own here, and I mean, computers run everything now. You can't do anything without a computer (New Hampshire, White, High Ed)

This was one of the few areas where there was no confusion about who should provide these skills and parents were *not* seen as primarily responsible—or qualified—and where the responsibility falls squarely on schools and programs rather than on caring teachers. This is a significant result. Once participants started to discuss the need to develop curriculum to teach what people overwhelmingly believed to be indispensable skills, individual responsibility rarely surfaced.

However, there are two important caveats. First, when primed about competitiveness, people tended to doubt the schools' ability to make students globally competitive. Second, it is important that the conversation about global competitiveness get to, and stick to, *programs*. If it is just providing the *equipment* (i.e. the computers), people are quick to point out that it is then up to the student to be motivated, to the *parent to provide* some of these resources, and to *students to use* the equipment. Thus, the line of reasoning defaults rapidly and naturally to a mentalist discussion of the centrality of motivation and discipline, with the conclusion that it is the lack of these personal individual traits that explains the downfall of American education.

Primes that Had More Tentative Results

A number of the speculative values and child development primes we applied in these groups had less definitive results in shifting focus group discussions. We briefly summarize the more mixed effects of these primes here.

1. **Well roundedness** was well received and would sometimes incite arguments for funding extracurricular activities and promoting experiential learning. On the other hand, it often triggered the Family Bubble model and the argument that *parents* are responsible for exposing children to activities and knowledge that go beyond standard academic lessons. Also, discussion of who should fund extracurricular activities and experiential learning tended to ignite Family Bubble discussions.

2. Similarly, calls for **accountability** at times led to discussion of the need for more and better teacher training as well as the need for all schools to be technologically equipped and up to date. However, this value also led to a negative association with extensive testing as well as a familiar discussion about the need to hold *parents* accountable.

3. Due to widespread recognition of the importance of **community involvement,** we were able to get some traction in getting participants to talk about the wide variety of "partners" parents need to ensure their children's success. However, this discussion narrowed dramatically when tied to the discourse about funding. When community involvement was tied solely to funding, people did not see the need to spend money on community programs; that is, funding community involvement was a responsibility of the community, not of the education system. Referring to the need for schools to provide extracurricular activities and services, one participant explained, "And it should be using community resources…that aren't so much 'school based'…It depends on what the resources are, but I do see these more as community based services rather than the

educational system services" (Vermont, White, Low Ed). So, to the extent that education reform advocates prime for community involvement, they may need to associate it with the discourse on inequality, rather than to funding as educational investment for community level programs.

4. Similar to the discussion of community involvement, developing more **supportive partnerships** between schools and parents was widely supported, and sometimes led to productive discussions about ways that schools could more effectively communicate with parents and provide unconventional supports for families. More frequently, however, discussions quickly devolved to the parent - ONLY/ family bubble viewpoint and into discussions about how such partnerships would be funded.

5. **Mentally and physically healthy environments** for children were widely supported and generated discussions about the need for counselors and clinics and healthy food choices in schools. But it, also led to discussions about safety, violence, personal responsibility, and the need for the family to take care of mental and physical needs—highly individualizing directions.

6. Like many of the values primes, the use of **the science of child development** as a prime produced mixed results. While we hoped this prime would sufficiently broaden the definition of "skills" and how cognitive, emotional and regulatory development are linked and stimulated in different settings, our execution of this developmental message did not achieve the desired break-through. While these developmental explanations sometimes led to calls for a greater variety of activities and programs for students including early childhood education, they were just as likely to trigger the Family Bubble, calls for more discipline and structure, and the claim that what experts describe is just about "plain old parenting." For example, after hearing about research highlighting the importance of skills like the ability to focus, follow directions, and control emotions, and how these skills can be taught in early education programs and significantly influence educational success, one participant stated:

> [T]hat is just plain old fashioned mother nurturing that children should receive at home, and even though I know we don't have mothers like we had when I was coming up, but if we just had parents in the home that would nurture these children, then they would be attentive because they know to listen to mama. (Memphis, African American, Low Ed)

7. Results were similarly mixed when we asked about **publicly funding preschool** within the context of a "common good" prime. There was often initial support for funding early childhood education because people believed that "the earlier you get them the better" (Memphis, African American, Low Ed). However, as conversation progressed, participants expressed reservations about funding a program that may be less about education and more about daycare and babysitting; that is, something for which *parents* should be responsible. In the words of one participant, "There are a lot of schools where schooling is really not schooling. It's a surrogate parent…I'm sorry. You make [the] babies, it is not everybody's job to raise 'em or feed 'em" (Indianapolis, Mixed Race, High Ed).

COGNITIVE HOLES

Focus group participants had a difficult time conceptualizing various ideas related to education and school reform, leading to "holes" in their ability to think about the education system and systems level reforms. These holes are mental voids where no lay cultural model is readily

available to process the specific issue or concept, or where the model that *is* employed to think about the concept may be dissonant or at odds with expert understandings. Provided with a means to better visualize these ideas and their underlying processes, participants' will likely be able to better employ available information in arriving at, explaining and defending their positions on educational issues, and be more apt to realize the importance of education reform policies. The following concepts were particularly "hard to think" for focus group participants and as a result, represent places where the development of a simplifying model (or other framing elements), could improve policy thinking:

1. The Educational System. Without deliberate and intentional priming, participants were largely unable to visualize the various people, roles and resources involved in creating and maintaining schools. Without being reminded of all of the actors and resources involved in making the educational system function, participants focused heavily on the parent-teacher-student triad. Broadening people's understanding of what and who is involved would go a long way in highlighting how the education system and education reform actually work and is an important step in clarifying the roles of citizens and the collective benefits of the education system.

2. Responsibility for Educating Children. Related to the first cognitive hole, people would also benefit from an improved way to visualize the roles and responsibilities of the different people, places, and resources involved in creating successful schools, ranging from parents, extended families, and students to citizens, neighborhoods, school boards, and governments.

3. Preschool as School. It has been clear from both our focus group and cultural models interview research that few people see preschool or early childhood education as "real" school or as a place where "real" learning takes place. On the other hand, the science points clearly at the importance of this "critical period" and to the value of quality early education environments as integral sites of learning. Bridging this lay-expert gap means clarifying and translating the science of early childhood development so that people see the relationship between early learning, the skills that early learning environment provide, and later outcomes.

4. The Community. While people generally recognize the importance of community involvement and can often articulate the need for community mentors and after school programs, they have difficulty visualizing and thinking about how communities play a role in education along with the benefits of this involvement. In short, people have a hard time understanding exactly what experts mean when they talk about "community" and what is entailed in "community involvement." Articulating ways that communities reinforce educational achievement is therefore important in clarifying the role that communities play in contributing to successful student outcomes.

5. Ways that School Systems Can Address Inequality. Because inequality is so entrenched and due to the difficulty in imagining how inequality can be realistically addressed at a systems level, reframing strategies that clarify *potential solutions* will have a dramatic impact on the public. A discussion of this sort would also help to people overcome the disempowerment and isolation with which they approach more structural issues in education reform.

6. 21st Century Skills. Although people generally believe that there are new sets of skills that are needed today for children to succeed in a rapidly changing world and a global economy, they have difficulty envisioning what those skills are beyond computers, and foreign language, and the ability to get along with diverse groups of people. Discussions of these types of skills also frequently devolved into individualist thinking in which the purpose of education becomes narrowly to enable individual success—a perspective which is powerful in obscuring any sense of collective purpose.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While it is still very early in the research cycle on this project to present concrete recommendations, there are some important insights that emerge from our analysis of the focus groups. These are offered here as interim recommendations, as they clearly afford better outcomes than existing communication strategies around education policies and reform. In future research, FrameWorks will focus on further refining these recommendations and detailing their specific framing effects.

1. School Reform as Concrete, Realistic, and Effective. When talking about school reform, provide realistic solutions. Make it easy for people to visualize what schooling involves and how specific reforms solve specific existing problems. Communicate in ways that empower and encourage instead of reinforcing the sense of hopelessness about entrenched educational inequalities and inflexibilities. Relate ideas to programs that have already succeeded, but explain how the current reform differs from others that have created change small piecemeal changes for a few, without solving the more entrenched problems of inequality and effective learning. This recommendation should further make clear why using a *Crisis* frame is likely to prove ineffective. People know the schools are in crisis; they do not need reminding of that fact. Such a reminder is likely to fuel feeling of disempowerment, undermine motivation, and inhibit engagement.

2. Fairness Between Places. When addressing inequality, talk about unequal access to resources between places (eg: funding, teachers, books, programs) not people (which is more likely to trigger thoughts of individual responsibility); for example, talk about differences in available services due to funding discrepancies. In addition, when people are able to see that the system is working in *some* places but not *every* place, it will appeal strongly to an "equality" value as well as highlighting the possibility that a failing school system need not be the norm. But we should also be careful here to avoid the trip wires associated with funding issues discussed above.

3. Opportunity vs. Outcomes. For education advocates, the presentation of drastic differences in test scores and graduation rates to emphasize the gross "achievement gap" between groups has been a popular way to talk about educational inequality and the need for change. However, this research strongly suggests that this strategy is likely to activate people's mentalist perspectives on family and personal responsibility—that all we really need to do is try harder, work with more motivation and be more disciplined as individuals. Instead of placing the spotlight on unequal *outcomes*, a more effective approach is to reinforce the existence of unequal educational

opportunity and then use differences in achievement as illustrations of what can happen when children are not provided with the same chances. There was unequivocal support for equality of opportunity, which was likely to call up people's concerns about unequal access to quality programs, classrooms, teachers and so forth. However, when people started to think about differences in successful outcomes, they were more likely to think about how a culture of *motivation* and hard work, a strong *family* foundation, and *caring* teachers can make the difference between success and failure.

4. College as an Opportunity. When advocating for college preparation for students, explain how such programs prepare students for the *opportunity* to go to college, or how universal preparation for college will create opportunities for all students, even if they choose to pursue vocational careers.

5. 21st Century Skills, AND. When advocating for schools to integrate 21st century skills, it should be made explicit that *old and new* basic skills should be taught in order to underscore that reading, writing, and arithmetic are not being neglected in favor of the "new" skills.

6. Save Parent/Teacher/Student Motivation for Later. Establish why and how proposed reform programs can solve educational challenges before integrating any discussions about parental involvement, student motivation, or caring teachers. Then, frame these issues in the context of educational programs that help to empower these groups to make change. Otherwise, these topics are likely to overshadow other discussions of reform.

Figure 2. Translating Public Discourse	
You Might Say…	**They Might Think…**
There's a significant achievement gap between white and minority/rich and poor children.	Not all children are the same, and some are more motivated than others. Their parents need to be more involved.
We want to create well rounded individuals.	Shouldn't parents be doing the rounding and exposing their children to various things?
Students need to be prepared with 21st century skills.	What happened to the basics? Some graduating seniors still can't read.
We want to prepare all children for college.	But not everyone wants or needs to go to college. Why aren't trades valued anymore?
We want to hold schools, teachers, and principals accountable.	Sounds great! But does that mean more testing…?
We need to publicly fund preschool programs.	Why should we do this when what preschools do is really the work of parents? We shouldn't use public money to let parents off the hook!
Preschool teaches kids important skills.	Yeah, they learn how to socialize and get along with each other.
Special education is an area that needs more funding.	When you fund these programs, the "middle" or "average" kids lose out.
We need more community involvement and more funding for community programs to help students	Our education dollars should not be supporting things that the community is responsible for.

achieve.	

CONCLUSION

Focus group participants strongly believed in the importance of education, but felt let down that such an important service is not being adequately administered in the United States. In short, they talked about education as essential, but also as a quickly sinking ship.

In their conversations, participants consistently negotiated and debated the fuzzy line between the roles and responsibilities of parents, students, teachers, school districts, communities, and governments in raising and educating children. Discussions about individual motivation and personal responsibility were viral in the way they took over and dominated focus group discussions. However, concerns about inequality of resources and ineffective curriculum were also strong. Participants agreed that many of education's problems are at the structural level, but were skeptical about system level *solutions* to these problems. Given this skepticism, they acted as pragmatists by focusing most of their conversations and recommendations for reform on the parent-student-teacher triad, where they felt there was actual possibility for impact.

In the words of one participant, "power and knowledge go hand in hand" (New Hampshire, White, High Ed). The goal for advocates, then, is to communicate in ways that create new conversations and avoid the dead end directions and pit falls that emerged from the focus group research discussed here—giving people the chance to think productively about the education system and its reform. Communications must create a different sense of agency—making it easier for people to understand the effects that ordinary citizens can have in influencing leaders and structures to propose realistic, effective, empowering, and comprehensive reforms.

APPENDIX
FOCUS GROUP METHODOLOGY

Key Findings from the Cultural Models Interviews

Using systematic data collection methods borrowed from cognitive anthropology, our cultural models interviews mapped the primary patterns of thinking, or "dominant cultural models," about education systems as well as "recessive cultural models" (or less pervasive understandings) against patterns of thinking that were conspicuously absent in the interviews but absolutely necessary for conceptualizing systems-level or public policy solutions. Key findings from that first report are as follows:

> 1) people generally lack cultural models for thinking about the collective benefits education, school *systems*, and the possibilities for comprehensive education reform;

> 2) attribution of responsibility for student success and failure is reduced to a triad of parents-students-teachers rather than as a lack of systems-level supports;

> 3) people believe that school officials like teachers and principals are important but people lack an understanding of *how* school leaders really matter and what kind of supports school officials really need to function successfully in their roles; and

> 4) people overwhelmingly think that good teachers are just born good teachers (because of their personality traits and general dispositions as caring individuals) rather than being the products of exceptional training and expertise.

Having established a basic understanding of how Americans think about education, the focus groups were designed to expand our understanding of the dominant cultural models. We also sought to explore how the use of these models in thinking about educational issues affects public discourse—or the way that people talk about these issues. Finally, we were interested in the extent to which thinking about education could be shifted away from the use of these largely individualizing dominant cultural models and reframed to encourage support for systems-level education reforms. For a more detailed understanding of the findings from the cultural models interviews, see *Reform What? Individualist Thinking in Education: American Cultural Models on Schooling*, on our website: www.frameworksinstitute.org.

The Analytic Strategy Underlying the Design of Focus Groups

In general, the focus group were structured to provide a mix of general discussion on the state of education in the United States, as well as innovative exercises used both to "prime" (or expose participants to different ways of thinking about education and to a wider range of actors/roles within educational systems) and to solicit creative thinking about the prospects for reform.

More specifically, we used a unique focus group approach to:

1) *verify* the primary findings from the cultural models interviews — specifically those findings related to identifying the dominant cultural models and cognitive holes that seemed to weaken the ability of people to conceptualize innovative education reforms;

2) *discover* and *explore* in greater depth any variations in those findings that emerged from group rather than in individual/one-on-one settings; and

3) *experiment* with potential values reframes that we hypothesized would have the potential to lift up systems-level thinking and thus, could be taken into the subsequent phases of our research (i.e. our simplifying models and/or quantitative testing work).

The focus groups were also iterative in the sense that we allowed their format to evolve as we successfully met the objectives above. As such, the findings in this report are a synthesis of three separate iterations of a focus group protocol that guided the activities in the focus groups we conducted.

A Word about the Uniqueness of Our Focus Group Approach

It is important to note that our approach to conducting focus groups (both in terms of methodology and our practical use of them) differs markedly from the sorts of focus groups typically conducted in communications research for the purposes of social messaging. First, our focus groups are part of a much larger research strategy to develop and empirically test ways of reframing social messages. As is customary at the FrameWorks Institute, we use multi-disciplinary, multi-method research approaches that include a variety of innovative and rigorous qualitative and quantitative techniques – of which focus groups are one component. Moreover, we use focus groups at multiple stages of this research to bridge and synthesize different aspects of our work. In this report, for example, the focus groups presented herein were conducted to bridge an understanding of the dominant cultural models (from our cultural models interviews) with the development/empirical validation of reframes and simplifying models that lift up systems-level thinking on education more readily.

A second "value-added" to our focus group approach is that our results integrate and demonstrate the complementarity between cognitive and descriptive approaches to focus group analysis. That is, we analyze what our participants explicitly say but we also examine what is missing in their discussions from the vantage point of encouraging systems-level or policy level thinking, the logic that under girds their viewpoints, and the context in which their views unfold in the discussion. Finally, we use our focus groups in an exploratory and iterative way – allowing them to evolve as the executions of the potential reframes emerge and transform the extent to which participants envision public policy solutions.

***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.

Standard rules for protection of intellectual property and citation apply. Citation should read:

Frameworks Institute, "Enough Blame to Go Around: A Focus Group Analysis of Education and Reform: A FrameWorks Research Report," Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute 2009.

All FrameWorks research reports are edited by the Institute.