



Promoting America's Public Schools: **Framing Education Conversations**

The national narrative around public education is discouraging, to say the least. With top politicians questioning the quality of our teachers and calling to “blow up the system,” educators know they need to take back the conversation. But how?

Common Assumptions - And What To Do About Them

- Education is influenced primarily by parents, students and teachers - and education problems are due to issues of motivation, character, discipline or effort on their part. **Therefore, provide a sense of the larger system in which those key actors operate.**
- Student success and teacher effectiveness are related to a single quality: caring. **Therefore, move the conversation to the importance of teacher preparation, professional development, recruitment and placement.**
- People assume that reforms to the current education system will require a lot of money. **Therefore, help people understand that some changes can be made by a reallocation of resources or in ways that are not expensive.**
- Everybody should be given the opportunity to go to college, but they should be given a choice of whether to pursue it. **Therefore, continue to send messages about college and career.**
- More individualized instruction is needed - not for innovation, but so that students can learn the basics. **Therefore, explain that personalized instruction does not always occur (but should) and address the distrust of the system that leads to assumptions that students don't know the basics.**
- Education is a limited commodity. **Therefore, steer clear of consumer or product orientation and explain that education is a common good, not something that some people can afford and some cannot.**



Messaging

While educators are well-versed in talking about academics, student achievement, test scores and other critical issues that are at the core of their work, they must broaden these messages by linking to the vision and values that the public holds for public schools.

Tip

Whenever possible, provide tangible examples pointing to results of efforts to strengthen public schools.

Words That Work

- **Strong public schools are the key to our nation’s economic future.** Economic arguments for the investment of time and resources into public education are worth pursuing.
- **High-quality public education is a right.** Americans see public education as a right, not a privilege, and share a strong belief that providing public education is one of the highest functions of government.
- **Public education benefits society, from public health to innovation to community stability to quality of life.** Many Americans understand that public education provides a collective benefit as well as individual benefits.
- **“Innovation” is important to improving teaching and learning.** Support for online learning, education technologies, charter schools and other new approaches to education is increasing. However, parents don’t want to see experimentation on their children, so be careful in word choice (some avoid the term “innovation” in favor of alternatives related to the initiative at hand).
- **The goal of education is the preparation needed to support our country’s quality of life in the future.** Tying back into the economic argument, this frame also reminds audiences that students need both new and basic skills.

Watch Your Language

- **Avoid emphasizing that the system of public education in America is broken.** When faced with the enormity of the broken system, people tend to become overwhelmed and gravitate towards investing in their own kids.
- **Avoid focusing on the individual child.** Emphasizing individual achievement and success tends to point people toward their own situation and away from solutions for the whole. Tie all stories back to solutions for all children.
- **Avoid citing international comparisons.** These comparisons tend to scare people, raising concerns about America’s rank and making them think that more “disciplined” nations will win in the end, leading to preconceived notions as to how education should look.
- **Avoid focusing the conversation immediately on skills.** If the conversation moves too quickly to skills students need, the audience will likely think only about computer and basic skills.



Background

This document is based on a 2012 review of the “education landscape” – polling data, communications efforts and rhetoric from politicians and the media at the national level – commissioned by the Learning First Alliance and conducted by Collaborative Communications, with the goal of learning what the general public believes around public schooling and developing messaging that resonates with it.

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