

# FREEDOM TO LEARN

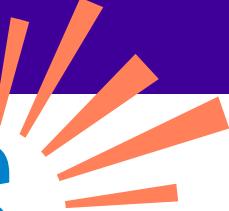
Demanding Accurate, Honest and  
Fully Funded Public Education



WE  
MAKE  
THE  
FUTURE

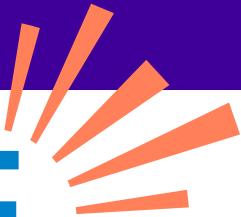


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# PURPOSE



By large margins, Americans support fully and equitably funding our public schools so that every child gets an accurate and honest education, providing them with critical thinking skills and the freedom to pursue their dreams. The majority of voters believe that funding for public schools should be increased in their state, and that this funding should be distributed not according to the wealth of each community but rather to ensure that “each child, regardless of zip code, has an equal right to a quality education.”<sup>1</sup> With respect to curriculum, Americans overwhelmingly say that we should teach “both our best achievements and our worst mistakes,” rejecting the competing claim that we should “focus on what makes this country exceptional and great.”<sup>2</sup>

**In other words: the public is with us in supporting public schools. It is time to boldly, loudly, and repeatedly share our vision for public education. When we do, we win.**

Our opposition knows this, which is why they have turned to their decades-long strategy of weaponizing racial fears. To do this, they distract from their failures with dog whistles and racial scapegoating. We have seen this play out in many ways from “political correctness” to “cancel culture” to their latest manufactured panic over Critical Race Theory (CRT). They hope to put us on the defensive, so that we refute their claims instead of proudly declaring our own vision and values for the future. Despite the volume of the opposition, we are on the winning side of this debate.

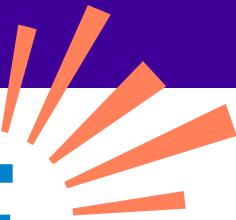
So how do we break a signal through the noise and make a proactive, compelling and mobilizing case for the well-resourced, equitable public schools every one of our children deserves?

## We must:

- Energize our base to take action, take up space, and relentlessly repeat our vision. That is how we remind the conflicted middle that our beliefs are indeed the norm, creating the pressure needed to contend with the opposition’s media infrastructure and vitriolic volume.
- Name who is at fault for the problems we face, expose why they fuel fear and division, and detail how we can join together to create change.
- Stay grounded in our shared values, overcoming apathy and cynicism by presenting a compelling vision for what public education can and should be.

Against the opposition’s race-baiting assault on public education, our only way forward is to talk about race. Based in the Race Class Narrative, the messaging guidance below is for educators, parents, administrators and advocates making the public case for a racially and economically just approach to education.

# MESSAGE STRUCTURE



## Lead with shared values, not problems.

- Effective values language includes: children's freedom to learn, be themselves and pursue their dreams. Honesty, integrity and learning are also effective anchoring values.
- Explicitly name or signal that we share these values across differences in race and class, "no matter what we look like or where we are from."

## Introduce the problem second.

- Use active language to make it clear that certain people created the problem — and, therefore, people have the power to fix it. Describe the reasons bad actors attempt to distract, fuel fear and divide us across race, gender and origin.

## Close with a positive vision for the future and how working together gets us there.

- Provide specific, tangible actions people can take, such as attending school board meetings, voting in elections, and contacting officials.
- Reference coming or joining together as part of the action. It is helpful to include previous examples of successfully joining together and achieving a goal.



# FULL NARRATIVES



These messages proved more convincing to our base and persuadable audiences than our opposition's attacks on an accurate and honest education and moved respondents in favor of increasing funding for public schools.

## Future

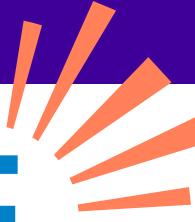
School is a place where childhood happens. A place where children of different places and races learn from the past, make sense of the present and prepare for the future. While educators work to deliver our children accurate and honest education, some politicians are trying to turn us against schools so they can censor the lessons taught in our classrooms, deny certain children resources and write people who look like them out of our history books. Our children deserve the freedom to learn: to develop the knowledge and skills to reckon with our past, shape a better future, and pursue their dreams. By speaking up at school boards, contacting our elected leaders, and voting to fully fund our schools, we can ensure every child the quality education we want for our own.

## Tell Hard Truths

Whatever our color, background, or zip code, we want our children to have an education that imparts honesty about who we are, integrity in how we treat others, and freedom to pursue our dreams. But for years, certain politicians have denied some children the resources needed for a quality education based on what they look like or where they live. Now those politicians want to censor the truth of our history, passing laws to ban learning from the mistakes of our past and erase leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. who stood up to racism and changed our country for the better. By joining together and speaking up at school board meetings, contacting our elected leaders, and voting to fully fund our schools, we can make this a country where every child has the freedom to learn, grow and thrive.



# MESSAGING GUIDANCE



**Focus on what we are for as opposed to what we are against, using language that paints a picture of our desired outcomes.**

- **Example:** engaging lessons in small classes, nurses and counselors who care for our kids, safe schools where every child belongs, honest and accurate education, etc.

**Connect the core purpose of education, including teaching about the past, to creating a better future.**

- **Example:** overcoming challenges, ensuring that children in families struggling to make ends meet receive the same education as children in wealthy families, imparting skills for the real world, etc.

**Express the purpose of education in collective terms — as helping “our country” — to generate greater desire for increased funding among base voters.**

- **Example:** “To help our country by providing children the skills they need to pursue the jobs and careers they want.”
- **Example:** “To help our country reckon with the mistakes of our past so we can repair them and create a better future for all.”
- **Example:** “To help our country learn from mistakes in our past so we can solve problems in our future.”

**Express the outcomes of our desired policies as benefiting children, not schools.**

- **Example:** “We need to change how we fund public schools, so that the children in communities that some politicians have shortchanged get the resources they need.”



**Characterize efforts to blame parents, teachers, and unions as a part of the opposition's strategy of keeping us from uniting for desirable, equitable outcomes. It is critical for us to identify "certain politicians" as those responsible for sowing racial division in the story we tell. Imagery of violent school board meetings or presentations of angry parents as the villains shuts people down and makes our base and persuadable audiences less likely to engage.<sup>3</sup>**

- **Example:** "Certain politicians try to turn us against schools and teachers, or point the finger at parents, to keep us from coming together to demand that every school gets the resources to provide every child a quality education, not just the children of the wealthy few."

**Contest opposition messaging on parental choice by explicitly naming freedom for children in our vision for public schools.**

- **Example:** "Most of us believe all children should have the freedom to pursue their dreams, so we must equip every school with the resources to deliver quality education that prepares every child for the future, no matter their color, background or zip code."

**Make ending calls to action concrete and oriented toward a clear goal, in order to help abate the cynicism that nothing can be done.**

- **Example:** "By joining together, speaking up at school board meetings and voting in local elections, we can make our schools places where every child belongs and can thrive, and this a country where we respect and support each other across our differences."
- **Example:** "Together, we can demand every child have the same quality education we want for our own and finally give all of our schools the resources they need by speaking up at meetings, contacting our elected leaders, and voting in every election from school board to Senate."



## **When addressing bans on accurate and honest curriculum, neutralize opposition dog whistles by exposing the motivations behind their tactics, and boldly state our vision for education that respects, reflects and supports children of every race, background, and origin.**

- Contrast the actions and motivations of educators who are teaching our children with the goals of the politicians pushing these bans.
  - **Example:** “Educators want to provide every child an accurate and quality education, while politicians want to exclude certain kids, denying their schools funding and writing people who look like them out of our history books.”
  - **Example:** “Educators are working hard to provide a quality education, while the same politicians opposing masks and lying about vaccines refuse to equitably fund our schools, and deny resources to certain schools that communities, parents and kids want to improve.”
- Connect the importance of learning history to improving the future when arguing against bans. People understand the purpose of education through a future orientation.
  - **Example:** “We need to teach children the truth of our history so they can reckon with our mistakes and make our future more just.”
  - **Example:** “To prepare children for the future, we need to teach them both the good and the bad of our history so we can avoid making the same mistakes.”
  - **Example:** “To prepare children for the future, we need to teach them both the good and the bad of our history so that they better understand the lives, cultures and experiences of different people.”

# SAY THIS

**Children of every race, background and zip code should have the freedom to learn and pursue their dreams.**

**Every child deserves an accurate, honest and quality education, no matter the color of their skin or where they call home.**

**Children deserve an honest and accurate education that enables them to learn from the mistakes of our past to help create a better future.**

**To prepare children for the future, we need to teach them both the good and the bad of our history so we can avoid making the same mistakes.**

**Children should have the freedom to learn with an education that prepares them for the future.**

## INSTEAD OF

Equitable schools  
Equity in education

## BECAUSE

The words “equity” and “equitable” don’t carry the same meaning for everyone. It can be confusing to our base and persuadable audiences, who are more likely to associate the terms with real estate wealth and loans than racial and economic justice. When we spell out what we mean by those terms, we have the vast majority of voters on our side.

## INSTEAD OF

Children deserve an honest and accurate education.

## BECAUSE

We must always connect “honest and accurate education” to outcomes. When we do not connect our values to our outcomes, our intended meaning can become unclear and lend credence to our opposition’s version of the story.

## INSTEAD OF

Teachers should have the freedom to teach...

## BECAUSE

Voters and educators respond more to the importance of curriculum for children and protecting their freedom to pursue their dreams, rather than to protecting the freedom of teachers to determine curriculum. Messages that connect curriculum to children’s futures are more effective than talking about teacher control.

# SAY THIS

**Educators want to provide every child an accurate and quality education, while certain politicians want to whitewash parts of our history so they can control a political narrative.**

**Educators want to provide every child an accurate and quality education, while certain politicians want to exclude certain children, denying their schools funding and writing people who look like them out of our history books.**



## INSTEAD OF

Anti-CRT parents/protesters are...

Politicians are trying to indoctrinate our kids.

## BECAUSE

The opposition is trying hard to present parents as the lead driving force. Going up against parents as messengers for the other side is our toughest terrain. We must contest that space and call out that this is a political agenda driven by political motivations.

When we criticize politicians solely on CRT – as trying to “control a political narrative” – everyone across demographics agrees, including our opposition. The idea of controlling a political narrative emerged in focus groups as a way to talk about the politicians who are seeking these bans. However, it is a contested space that reflects much of the existing opposition rhetoric. More extreme language, like “indoctrination,” performs better with our opposition than with our base, suggesting that it unhelpfully reinforces their worldview.

When we juxtapose educators with politicians, framing the latter as wanting to exclude certain children – both by denying funding and by writing people out of history books – our base and persuadables all agree strongly and only our opposition moves away.

“Certain children” is a deliberate word choice to expose how the villains are picking and choosing who counts. And this is a place in the message where you can insert explicit identities (i.e. Black and brown children, Native kids, transgender youth) that make sense for and match your context.

# ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Two online surveys administered by Lake Research Partners. The first from September 24 –October 1, 2021, among a total of 1000 registered voters nationwide with additional samples of 100 Black registered voters, 100 Latinx registered voters, and 100 Asian American and Pacific Islander voters nationwide as well as 200 registered voters in California, 200 registered voters in North Carolina, 200 registered voters in Maryland, and 200 registered voters in Washington. The second from October 29 - November 4, 2021, among a total of 1000 registered voters nationwide.

<sup>2</sup> 12th annual American Values Survey, conducted online by Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) and Brookings between September 16 - 29, 2021, among a random sample of 2,508 adults living in all 50 states.

<sup>3</sup> Frameshift: Memo 28 Public Education Results.