

ESSA and Equity:

Findings and Best Practices for Messaging



Introduction

Discourse on education is a muddled morass where “school choice,” “reform,” and “accountability” are used on all sides. Advocates for advancing equity in public schooling are often on defense. Appeals to increase “inputs” in order to “produce” better “outputs” give into dominant notions of education as a business endeavor. Reliance on constructions like “the achievement gap grew” shield from view the deliberate choices behind outcomes.

With all this in mind, we undertook a **four-phase research process** to uncover a compelling narrative to motivate public support for achieving education equity. These are the tested “words that work” to persuade Americans on making public education equitable, with explicit calls to attend to race, class, and disability.

This methodology stems from the recognition that the job of a good message is not to say what’s popular; it’s to make popular what we need said. Toward this end, we segment our respondents by their underlying attitudes, not their partisan identity or demographic characteristics. Our base is our “choir:” we want messages they not only approve but will repeat. Persuadables are the majority. They are with us on some core ideas but lured by our opposition’s claims as well. Our messages must move them toward our beliefs and policy prescriptions. Finally, the very small segment that disagrees with us at their core is our opposition. We want messages that alienate them in order to ensure what we say isn’t simply popular; it actually persuades toward our beliefs.

Messaging Principles

The job of a good message is not to say what is popular. It is to make popular what needs to be said. Convincing the minds of the bulk of Americans – the persuadables – that our policies for achieving educational equity are the right policies relies on the following principles:

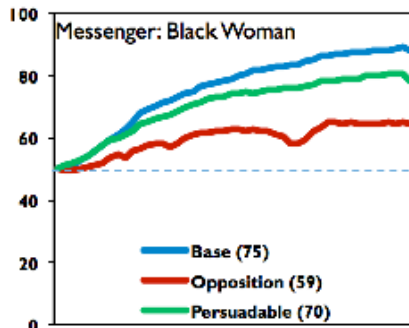
- **DO** lead with a shared value like fairness, collective responsibility, desire for success
 - DON’T** start your message with the nature and extent of current problems
- **DO** pivot to the problem next, making clear that deliberate choices are behind outcomes
 - DON’T** rely on passive constructions that obfuscate how we got into our situation
- **DO** end on a clear call to action that echoes back to the original shared value
 - DON’T** conclude with further articulation of problem, which increases sense of futility
- **DO** make race, class, and disability explicit after you establish a shared value
 - DON’T** avoid naming specifically harmed groups nor lead off with them
- **DO** combine individual outcomes, e.g. each child can reach their potential, ensure each child has the same opportunities, with collective ones, e.g. better for America’s future, provide resources for the schools that need the most help
 - DON’T** rely solely on either individual or collective concerns or outcomes

Base (22% of adults) in the sample	Persuadables (65% of adults) in the sample	Opposition (13% of adults) in the sample
<p>They believe a quality education is a shared responsibility and we need to provide schools the resources needed to provide a quality education. They are more likely to agree with the need to provide additional resources to the schools that need them the most, rather than provide all resources equally. They strongly favor publicly identifying schools that are not providing a quality education.</p> <p><i>They are more likely to be women, younger, Democrats and Latino.</i></p>	<p>They have attitudes that overlap with both base and opposition. They are particularly reform- and change-oriented, favoring vouchers, NCLB, and ESSA more than the base or opposition.</p> <p><i>They more closely reflect the demographics of the general public.</i></p>	<p>They believe that spending more money on public schools are not going to make them better and more likely to believe that student success depends on an individual’s intelligence and dedication. They reject calls to increase funding in low-income communities or communities of color.</p> <p><i>They are more likely to be men, older, White, and Republicans.</i></p>

Messages Tested By Online Dial Survey

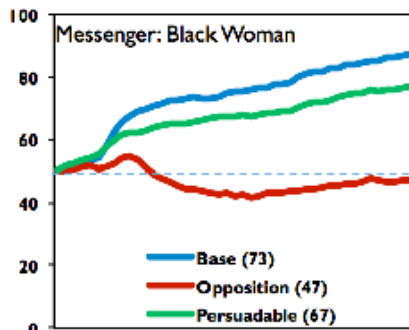
Messages were tested for moment-to-moment responses in an online survey with 1,500 adults nationwide with oversamples of 100 African Americans, 100 Latinos, 100 parents with children in public schools. Below are the winning messages that beat the opposition argument and increase people's willingness to take action. The lines on the graphs are the moment-to-moment reactions to an audio recording of each message by our base, opposition, persuadables, and activists. People dialed positively (above 50) when they had a favorable reaction to the words and negatively (below 50) when they had an unfavorable reaction. The number in parentheses represents the mean dial rating for that message. Passages in bold were especially effective.

The text of each message has been modified slightly to replace ineffective language.



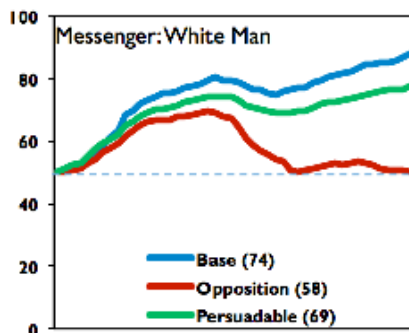
Future of Individual

We want America to be a place where **every child, no matter their unique challenges, their unique needs, or where they come from, can grow up to be what they dream.** When we ensure every child **quality public schooling** and hold them to **high academic standards**, we **empower them with the skills and courage to forge the path** to their own brightest future. It's up to us to **put every school on track, especially those pulled off course**, by investing in what we know works: quality skilled teachers, challenging courses, and support services that ensure our kids have all they need to focus on all they can become. **Everyone means everyone, no exceptions.**



Righting Wrongs

The chances a child has to pursue their dreams **should not depend on their zip code.** But for too long, **our leaders have shortchanged public schools in low-income communities, and especially in communities of color.** By shortchanging the schools that are educating the kids facing the greatest barriers, **policymakers keep children trapped and disadvantaged** compared to schools that have the resources to support every child. **It is time we right this wrong** and stop treating children in poor communities or who have learning disabilities unfairly. **Let's start giving children the additional resources they need to have the same opportunities as everybody else.**



Shared Responsibility

Making sure that all children have a quality **education that prepares them for the future is a responsibility that we all share**—parents, grandparents, teachers, neighbors, and elected leaders. Ensuring every child in America a quality education **puts them all on equal footing.** But, right now, **we exclude certain children from a quality education because lawmakers choose not to adequately fund schools in low-income communities.** If we care about the futures of millions of children **who live in households struggling to make ends meet, then making this right—investing the most in the schools that need it the most—is a duty we all share.**

Language Recommendations

Say:	Instead of:	Notes
Schooling, public education	Public schools	Stronger terms when advocating for resources.
Unequal funding	Not enough funding	Unequal has an additional layer of value that lack of funding does not.
Child/Children	Students	Child/children evokes familiarity, emotion and desire to care. "Student" is not how people think of the young people in their lives.
More resources...no matter their zip code	More resources...no matter how they learn	A more explicit call for funding disparities helps make case for resources, though highlighting children with learning disabilities in call for resources is effective too.
Children in low-income communities	Children in low-income families	Avoid playing into trap of parents not doing enough as the reason for outcomes.
Hold schools accountable if the school does not educate	Hold schools accountable if the students do not learn	Making schools the agent focuses problem where it belongs and sets up argument for increased and better resources.
Give more resources to the schools that need the most help	Education equity, equitable funding	Spelling out what equity means is more effective than relying upon the term itself.
Schools have been deprived for too long	Schools that have fewer resources	Positioning funding disparities as a choice, not an accident, lays foundation for making other choices. This didn't just happen. It was produced by a set of actions that can be reversed.
Future success	Positive experience learning	Start with a strong aspirational value which is at the key of education as a value.
Quality teachers, new technology, art, music, science, challenging classes	Resources	Painting a picture of what resources will purchase and thus help create increases people's desire to supply these resources.
If the schools do not educate and perform well	If the students do not learn and thrive	Making schools the agent focuses the problem where it belongs and sets up an argument for increased and better resources.
Shared vision for success, high academic standards, put every school on track	Metrics, accountability	The terms "metrics" and "accountability" bring up a quantitative frame, reducing children to test scores and privileging skill and drill approach parents reject.
Equip our children to be good citizens, equip them with the skills to forge the best path to their future	Train our future workforce, improve our economic potential	Making the purpose of education personal and aspirational is far more moving than putting forth a purely practical economic argument.
Love of learning	Student performance	"Performance" suggests a set, homogeneous outcome that all students ought to be able to deliver. Love of learning is an element of education that parents believe sets the foundation for good outcomes.

Methodology

Language Analysis: Using a variety of techniques from cognitive linguistics, a field dedicated to how people process information and communicate, ASO Communications examined how people reason and come to conclusions about education issues.

Interview Analysis: ASO Communications conducted 24 cognitive elicitation interviews with advocates for education equity. These transcribed conversations reveal the underlying assumptions and beliefs of dedicated policy experts and activists and helped form the basis of messages tested in subsequent phases.

Focus Groups: Lake Research Partners conducted 8 focus groups in 2016 segmented as follows: Baltimore, November 14th – suburban White parents, and suburban African-American parents; Atlanta, November 15th – urban African-American parents, public school teachers; Chicago, November 16th – suburban White parents, suburban Latino parents; Los Angeles, November 17th – urban Latino parents, parents of students with disabilities. Participants were recruited to be a mix of ideology, marital status, and education level. They were recruited to reflect a mix of attitudes toward public education.

National Online Dial Survey: Lake Research Partners designed and administered this survey with ASO, which was conducted online from January 8 – 14, 2017. The survey reached a total of 1,500 adults nationwide with oversamples of 100 African Americans, 100 Latinos, and 100 public school parents with children in elementary school (ages 6-11). The margin of error for the nationwide adults sample is +/-2.5%. It is larger for subgroups.