

FUNDING FOR OUR CHILDREN'S FUTURE

A MESSAGING HANDBOOK TO BUILD
MOMENTUM IN 2022 AND BEYOND ———

INTRODUCTION

We recognize advocates are working through an extremely challenging time for our country and our public education system. In 2021, public education faced unprecedented attacks, as school boards and state legislatures across the country passed sweeping measures to ban books and historical lessons, making it illegal for teachers and students to discuss racism and inequality—all in the midst of an ongoing pandemic.

As these and other challenges flow into 2022, it's critical to recognize that a majority of voters across the country philosophically agree that children deserve an education where they are given the support they need to thrive. At the same time, as advocates for educational equity, we still face an organized, vocal, and well-funded opposition.

This research and communications effort was initiated to support state coalitions and national organizations affiliated with The Resource Equity Funders Collaborative in their fight to make schools more equitable. The last few years have dramatically shifted how the public views our education system, necessitating research and messaging that enables advocates to understand what language most powerfully drives support for resource equity.

The ultimate goal of this handbook is to equip advocates across the field with research-backed, unified messaging and guidance that allows them to speak across partisan divides, break through siloed thinking, and tackle the stickiest conversations on school funding. This handbook aims to support advocates as they build momentum to drive legislative change.

This work would not have been possible without the expertise and guidance of the state coalitions and national organizations affiliated with the Resource Equity Funders Collaborative. Our partners in the State Comms Working Group and National Working Group have been instrumental to this effort. We also extend our appreciation to PEER (The Partnership for Equity and Education Rights).

We hope you find this a valuable resource in your efforts to advocate for resource equity for students.

With gratitude,
RALLY, Lake Research Partners, & HIT Strategies

OUR CHILDREN
DESERVE
SUPPORTIVE,
INCLUSIVE
EDUCATIONAL
ENVIRONMENTS
WHERE THEY
CAN ALL THRIVE.

SOME OF OUR PARTNERS



We engaged these organizations throughout the development of this guidance to ensure it ultimately reflects the needs and realities of the resource equity field.

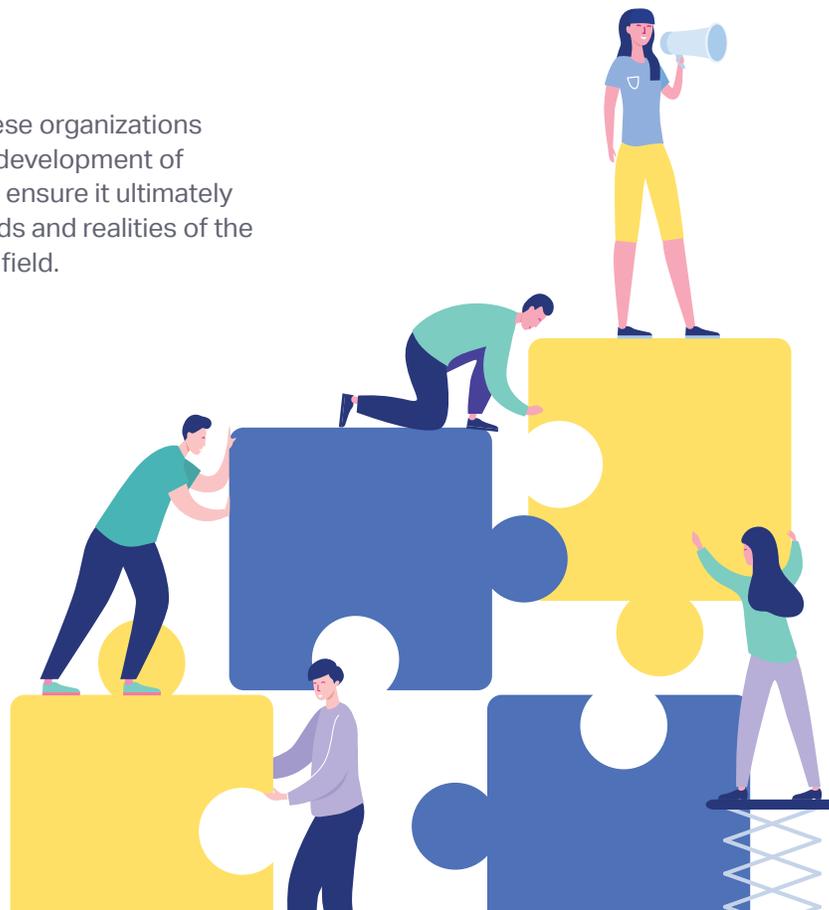


TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	INTRODUCTION	02
II.	OUR APPROACH	05
III.	GUIDING MESSAGING PRINCIPLES	06
IV.	THE EDUCATION LANDSCAPE	07
V.	KEY AUDIENCES	10
VI.	CORE MESSAGING	13
VII.	ISSUE-SPECIFIC MESSAGING	16
VIII.	CHOOSING A MESSENGER	18
IX.	DO'S, DON'TS	20
X.	LANGUAGE NUANCES	21

OUR APPROACH

We formed the messaging guidance in this handbook based on an extensive, iterative, and collaborative research process.

This includes **THREE SEPARATE PHASES** of research:

- A **QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS** that included an audit of existing research and messaging materials, media analyses of state and national coverage of public education funding, and interviews with stakeholders across the country.
- Followed by **NATIONAL FOCUS GROUPS** with voters from a diverse demographic range, including age, race, gender, income, education, and locale. This qualitative phase provided deep insight into voter attitudes toward public school funding and the language they use to talk about the issue.
- Finally, **AN ONLINE MESSAGING SURVEY** among voters nationwide. They came from 10 target states (CA, GA, IL, MD, MI, NC, NM, PA, TN, and VA) and additional oversamples of Black, Latinx, Asian American, and Indigenous registered voters nationwide. This survey provided quantitative data on the most effective messages, target audiences makeup, effective messengers, and more.

25.9K

Articles included
in media analyses

46

Research reports, policy
papers, and messaging
materials read

15

Stakeholders
interviewed

13

Focus groups

1600+

Voters in an online
nationwide survey

Together, these three elements serve as the foundation for our messaging guidance. This comprehensive approach has ensured the messaging that follows reflects how the world has changed over the past two years.

GUIDING MESSAGING PRINCIPLES

Messaging, especially in a polarized environment, is not a one-size-fits all solution. To be effective, it must be tailored to the messenger, audience, and context.

We offer four principles of effective messaging to consider as you apply the guidance that follows to your work:

1 BE AUTHENTIC.

Messaging is effective when delivered authentically. The language guidance that follows is flexible, to be tailored in a way that feels honest to and resonant with whoever is delivering it. If you believe what you're saying, your audience is more likely to as well.

2 THE MESSENGER MATTERS AS MUCH AS THE MESSAGE.

Different messengers will be effective across different audiences. It's just as important to make sure you're considering who the right messenger is for your audiences as it is to have the right message.

3 ADAPT THIS TO YOUR OWN CONTEXT.

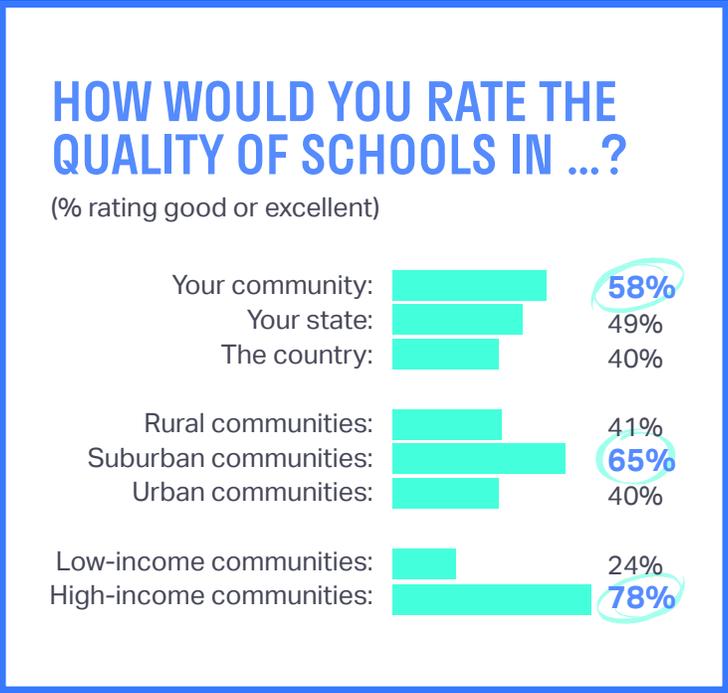
Each person reading this handbook works across largely different contexts, whether national vs. state-level advocacy, grassroots organizing vs. policy development, or in a blue state vs. a red state vs. a purple state. You know your context better than anyone, so we encourage you to take what works for you from this handbook but don't feel obligated to use what doesn't.

4 DON'T MAKE ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT YOUR AUDIENCE.

We recognize that the makeup of your audience will and should shape what you say. The messaging in this handbook is effective across broad audiences of base and persuadable voters, but we encourage you to think critically about your audience and the context.

EDUCATION LANDSCAPE IN AMERICA IN 2022

Understanding how Americans perceive our public education system is an essential first step to effectively communicating our vision. This section provides a snapshot of voters’ attitudes toward public schools today, so we can shape their perceptions about what is possible in the future.



CYNICISM

Americans believe public schools are struggling, but we face deeply-held cynicism about what can be done to improve student outcomes.

Many voters believe schools across the nation are struggling and there's clear recognition that the quality of public schools varies widely depending on where a family lives and the wealth of their community. Just 1-in-4 rate the quality of schools in low-income and urban communities positively.

Voters do, however, feel more positively about the schools in their own communities. Most families don't have time to worry about the system as a whole when they are focused on making sure their own children attend quality schools.

"We've seen a system failing for many years and I think it seems like the system itself is so bad that whoever comes in power, they cannot do anything to rectify it. There has been... decades of abuse that has happened and that has brought, I mean my state in particular, to this kind of sorry state of affairs."

- Male, Asian, Persuadable

FUNDING ATTITUDES

Given perceptions of the state of America's public schools, a majority of voters support increasing funding and allocating funding more equitably. Not surprisingly, the support wanes if it requires them to pay more in taxes.

"I would say [lower performing schools] need a boost so they can become equal to those... who are higher up. And they can get there by funding and additional resources. So if we give everybody the same, it doesn't necessarily mean that they will be equal. Because they started out a little bit lower, so they're going to need more help to get up to speed with other schools."

- Female, Black, Base

SUPPORT FOR...

INCREASING FUNDING FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN YOUR STATE:



INCREASING FUNDING EVEN IF THEY PAY MORE IN TAXES:



FUNDING SCHOOLS BASED ON STUDENT NEED RATHER THAN EQUALLY:



strongly favor total favor

URGENCY

Though voters are generally supportive of increasing funding and allocating it more equitably, they lack urgency to fix the system, which diminishes advocates' ability to put pressure on legislators to drive change.

"I just don't feel like [education is] on the agenda at the moment. Again, everybody's talking about... COVID, but it's just not a topic of conversation that is imperative, I guess."

– Male, Black, Persuadable (Parent)

BARRIERS TO INVOLVEMENT

Aversion to discussing politics is the greatest barrier to increased political participation, exceeding even the sense that it won't make a difference.

LIKELIHOOD TO PARTICIPATE IN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES



Opinion research clearly demonstrates Americans recognize the need to improve schools, but are skeptical about what can be done and don't feel motivated to demand change.

To move the needle, we must intensify support for increasing funding and funding schools based on need, and drive urgency among voters. Messaging needs to help voters overcome cynicism, paint a picture of what's possible, and make everyone—not just parents or students—feel they have a stake in this fight.

WHAT HOLDS YOU BACK FROM TAKING ACTION?



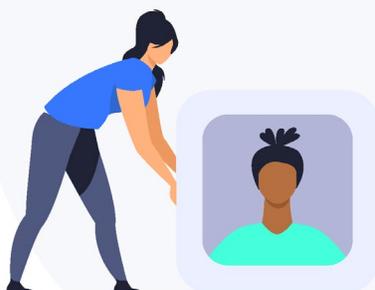
KEY AUDIENCES

Throughout this handbook, we will refer to Base and Persuadable audiences, both of which are essential to the success of advocates.

Messaging that speaks to everyone moves no one—the guidance that follows is designed with those we actually need to move in mind.

We think of our audience as 3 segments:

- **BASE (25% OF VOTERS):** core supporters whom we need to activate and engage to build momentum
- **PERSUADABLES (61% OF VOTERS):** those in the vast middle who are open to our vision but need to hear from us repeatedly to bring to our side
- **OPPOSITION (14% OF VOTERS):** these are the folks who are diametrically opposed to our vision and will never move; though they make a lot of noise, it's important to remember they are a small fraction of voters

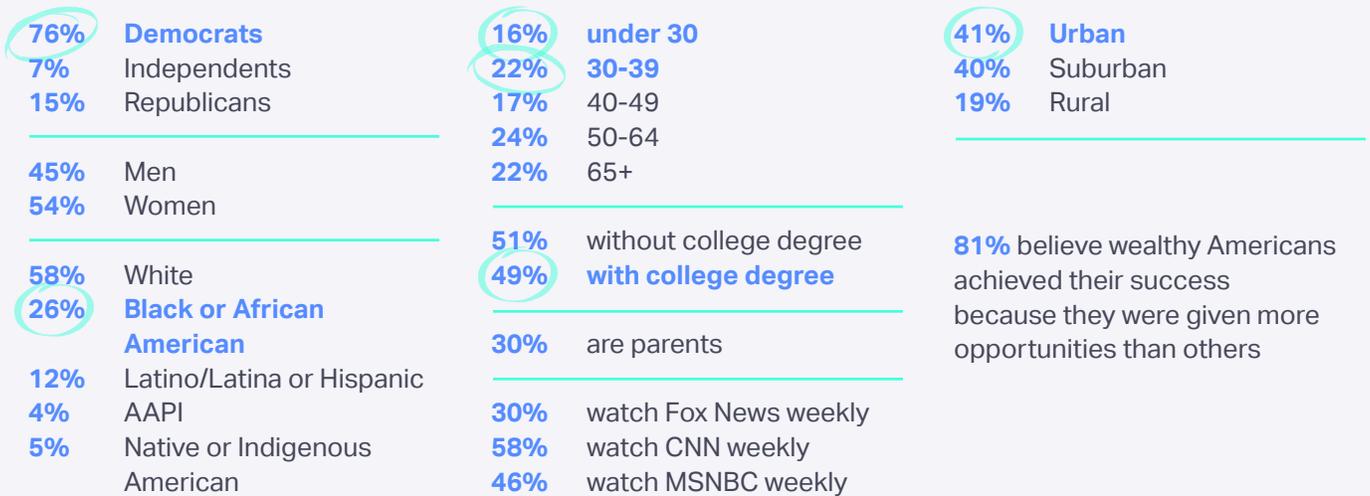


Our goal in messaging is to identify the language that **ACTIVATES OUR BASE** and **CONVINCES PERSUADABLES**. The guidance that follows is proven to do both, backed by rigorous message testing. We purposely **AVOID LANGUAGE THE OPPOSITION PREFERS**, which ensures we never water down our voice to placate those we don't need to win over.

So who makes up these audiences?
The following is a demographic snapshot of each group.

UNDERSTANDING OUR BASE (25% OF VOTERS)

Our Base is made up of voters who share a few key attitudes on critical aspects of this issue. Those in our Base all believe: we should provide more funding to the schools that need the most help; people of color face greater barriers to economic success in this country; the government's role is to create opportunities for advancement.



UNDERSTANDING PERSUADABLES (61% OF VOTERS)

Our Persuadable audience is made up of voters who fluctuate between alignment with and divergence from our perspective on a few critical aspects of this issue. While they believe schools should be funded well enough to provide every child a quality education and tend to hold a more progressive worldview on issues of race, they are divided on whether spending more on schools will improve education quality.

46% Democrats	11% under 30	35% Urban
10% Independents	21% 30-39	37% Suburban
42% Republicans	20% 40-49	28% Rural
<hr/>	26% 50-64	
44% Men	23% 65+	
56% Women	<hr/>	49% believe wealthy Americans achieved their success because they were given more opportunities than others
68% White	61% without college degree	
17% Black or African American	39% with college degree	
9% Latino/Latina or Hispanic	36% are parents	
4% AAPI	<hr/>	
2% Native or Indigenous American	45% watch Fox News weekly	
	38% watch CNN weekly	
	32% watch MSNBC weekly	

UNDERSTANDING THE OPPOSITION (14% OF VOTERS)

Our Opposition is made up of voters who are universally opposed to our vision of equity. They believe that spending more taxpayer money on schools won't help if parents aren't involved, people of color are entirely responsible for their own condition, and government should get out of peoples' way.

7% Democrats	3% under 30	20% Urban
7% Independents	12% 30-39	40% Suburban
84% Republicans	11% 40-49	40% Rural
<hr/>	40% 50-64	
56% Men	34% 65+	
44% Women	<hr/>	82% believe wealthy Americans achieved their success because they worked harder than others
85% White	58% without college degree	
3% Black or African American	42% with college degree	
5% Latino/Latina or Hispanic	<hr/>	
1% AAPI	22% are parents	
3% Native or Indigenous American	<hr/>	
	45% watch Fox News weekly	
	14% watch CNN weekly	
	14% watch MSNBC weekly	

CORE MESSAGING

The messages in this section are key narratives and talking points that effectively activate our Base and move Persuadable voters.

NARRATIVES

Most voters don't understand how schools are funded, making it hard to envision the change we are looking for. Moving our Base and Persuadable audiences will require not just a soundbite, but a complete narrative that describes our aspirations.

We provide three examples of effective narratives here that are proven to resonate among our Base and Persadables. In providing these examples and the architecture of a narrative, we hope you will use these as starting points and contextualize them to your efforts and audiences.

A narrative message is made up of four elements:

SHARED VALUES: to begin from a place of agreement and invoke our audiences' core values

DESCRIBING THE NEED: to explain why this is important, without overly emphasizing "problems"

EXPLAINING OUR VISION: to show our aspiration for children and schools so voters realize what is possible

PROVIDING A CALL TO ACTION: to activate audiences and help them recognize they have a role to play in this

Narrative 1

UNIQUE NEEDS

SHARED VALUES — Every child deserves a quality education — one that recognizes their unique needs and provides them the resources they need to reach their full potential.

THE NEED — Ensuring each child has access to the support they need requires guaranteeing schools are funded based on their students' needs, not their neighborhood.

OUR VISION — Real learning can't happen when kids start the day hungry or stressed out about problems at home, so let's make sure students have access to healthy meals and trusted counselors. Children can't form positive relationships with adults in their school if they don't feel safe or welcome, so let's create learning environments that foster social and emotional development.

CALL TO ACTION — Each student's needs are different, so let's come together and demand that schools get enough funding to meet those needs.

Narrative 2

COMMUNITY

- SHARED VALUES** — Our families, communities, and futures depend on the quality of education we provide for our children.
- THE NEED** — When we give public schools the funding they need, it strengthens communities, making them better places to live, raise a family, and even start a business.
- OUR VISION** — Fixing how we fund schools will allow them to provide resources like nutritious meals, mental health support, and career training for the children that need them. This ensures a better future for our children and that we all live in healthy, thriving communities.
- CALL TO ACTION** — Our children need us now more than ever to ensure they have the opportunity to reach their full potential. That requires us demanding access to a quality education for all, from voting in local elections to holding our elected leaders accountable.

Narrative 3

SUCCESS STORY

- SHARED VALUES** — No matter their race or the community they live in, children deserve an education that helps them reach their full potential.
- THE NEED** — But for years, some elected leaders have left schools - from rural areas to major cities - with overcrowded classrooms and teachers forced to buy their own supplies.
- OUR VISION** — A better way is possible — when we provide enough funding to our schools to meet their unique needs, the results are clear. When a California city recently came together to pass a measure to base school funding on student need, they saw graduation rates increase nearly 60 percent in 6 years.
- CALL TO ACTION** — This type of transformation is possible when we come together to fix how we fund schools so they can provide every child a quality education.

TALKING POINTS

Sometimes you won't have time for narrative-based messaging. In situations that call for compelling talking points, whether to round out a speech, incorporate into an op-ed, or include with a digital ad, we've developed talking points that address critical components of school funding conversations.

- **DEFINING EQUITY:** Every child is unique, so every school should be funded based on its unique needs. Providing students enough resources and support allows them to reach their full potential.
- **HOW WE GOT HERE:** For years, some elected leaders have underfunded education, leaving schools from rural areas to major cities with overcrowded classrooms and students forced to learn in unsafe buildings in need of repair.
- **HOW TO GET WHERE WE WANT TO GO:** When we come together to fix how we fund schools we can provide every child a quality education.
- **PROBLEMS & ASPIRATIONS:** Real learning can't happen when kids start the day hungry or stressed out about problems at home, so let's make sure those who need it have healthy meals and trusted counselors.
- **PAINTING AN INCLUSIVE PICTURE:** Every child, no matter their race or whether they live in an urban, suburban, or rural area, deserves a quality education.
- **VALUE OF AN EDUCATION:** Every child deserves a quality education that not only teaches them basic skills like reading, writing, and math, but also helps them get the skills needed to get a good job and allows them to realize their full potential.



ISSUE-SPECIFIC MESSAGING

Beyond core messaging and narratives, advocates must engage across a number of related ongoing education funding debates. This section offers language guidance on some of the most hot-button topics on the public and legislators' minds; we acknowledge this is by no means exhaustive of all issues advocates face.

WHAT SHOULD FUNDING GO TO?

It's important to name not just the need for more money, but what more funding can or will actually go toward. This helps voters realize the immense impact funding has on student experiences. Base and Persuadable audiences find the following the most urgent priorities we should increase funding for.

EVERYONE: Healthy meals for students who need them

OUR BASE: Technology and high-speed internet access
Mental health and counseling supports

PERSUADABLES: Vocational and career training
Repairing buildings and making them safe

These rose to the top of an extensive list of potential uses of resources. Of course policy will impact a long range of priorities beyond these, but when looking to identify those that might resonate most with voters, we recommend starting with this list.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH RELYING ON PROPERTY TAXES FOR FUNDING?

Voters are well-familiar with how property taxes are used to fund schools and many assume the taxes from their community should go to their community's schools. Driving an equity narrative requires pushing back on this argument.

THE WINNING MESSAGE:

We should fix how we fund schools so that funding for every child's school is based on the students' needs, not the neighborhood it's in.

WHY IT WORKS:

- "Fix" framing positions property tax funding as inherently broken
- Base and Persuadable audiences recognize the value of need-based funding
- Puts the focus on students and their needs

LANGUAGE TO AVOID:

We should change how we fund schools so that children in the wealthiest communities don't get the most funding.

WHY THIS DOESN'T WORK:

This language positions it as a zero-sum decision, whereby wealthy communities will suffer if we change the system. Voters are generally averse to more polarizing language like this.

➔ WHY SHOULDN'T WE JUST GIVE CHILDREN VOUCHERS TO GO TO PRIVATE SCHOOLS?

Voucher narratives are making their way through states across the country. To combat this, we need to demonstrate we equally recognize the value of “freedom” for children. Voters generally believe taxpayer funds should go to public schools, so our response needs to connect these dots in a values-based way.

OUR WINNING MESSAGE:

Children should have the freedom to pursue their dreams. We need to strengthen our public schools to ensure every child has a fair shot at a quality education, not let politicians take money from public schools to pay for private school vouchers.

WHY IT WORKS:

- Centers children and anchors message in values of freedom and fairness on behalf of them
- Voters clearly understand need to strengthen public schools
- Makes the impact of vouchers on public schools clear

LANGUAGE TO AVOID:

Public schools are the backbone of our country. They ensure every student has access to a quality education and successful life. We need to strengthen our public schools, not let politicians take money from public schools to pay for private school vouchers

WHY THIS DOESN'T WORK:

This language centers schools as institutions before children, and some voters may feel it overstates the promise of public education.

➔ WHY SHOULD TEACHERS TEACH ABOUT RACISM AND INEQUALITY?

Even as we strive for progress on resource equity, we recognize many education conversations remain concentrated on the backlash against equity in education more broadly. In these instances, Base and Personable audiences respond better when messages take a values-based stand for what children deserve. We need to say what we are for, first, and avoid the tendency to respond on the opposition argument's terrain.

OUR WINNING MESSAGE:

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

WHY IT WORKS:

- Asserts what children deserve on our own terms
- Leads with a core value that immediately ties a solution to a positive outcome
- Uses positive and aspirational language

LANGUAGE TO AVOID:

Anti-CRT laws ban teachers from teaching about racism and inequality. We need to let educators determine our children's curriculum, not politicians.

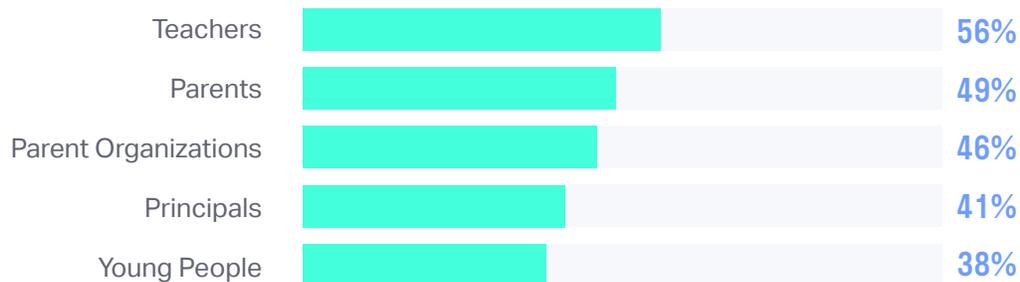
WHY THIS DOESN'T WORK:

The language centers teachers and laws before students. Voters respond better when problems are directly connected to solutions and aspirations. Most people do not know what CRT is.

CHOOSING A MESSENGER

Even the most thoughtful, nuanced language can fall flat when conveyed by the wrong messenger to the wrong audience. Effective messengers are vital to making an impactful connection with an audience. Their ability to identify common ground and deliver a persuasive argument can make the difference between a message being resonant or off-tune, moving or inauthentic, and believed or doubted.

% OF RESPONDENTS WHO REPORTED THEY TRUST “A GREAT DEAL/ A LOT”



When choosing a messenger for a given audience, we must be thoughtful to ensure the best possible outcome. Across every key audience, including Persuadable voters, **teachers** and **parents** are the most trusted messengers on public education issues. They're the people closest to students' daily lives and are expected to best understand what they need to succeed.

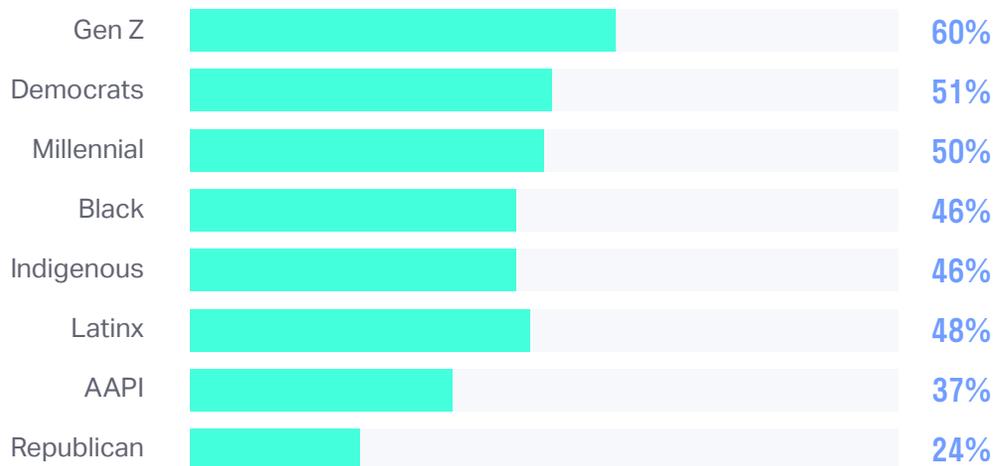
However, attitudes toward teachers aren't entirely positive and there is more skepticism towards them than in years past. Republicans hold considerable distrust, with just **43%** saying they trust teachers (compared to **69%** of Democrats). Republicans are more likely to believe that underperforming teachers can't be fired, are overprotected by unions, and bring political bias into the classroom. Instead, Republicans exhibit the most trust in parents (**51%**). →

Across the board, voters lack trust in elected officials, whether it’s local leaders, state representatives, or school board members. Both our Base and Persuadable audiences believe elected officials are to blame for the quality of today’s public education system, making them some of the least effective messengers on public school issues.

ACTIVATING STUDENT VOICES

Students are powerful voices when it comes to describing their needs—what they need to learn, the resources their schools require, etc. While students are less trusted overall than some figures, many key audiences value student perspectives. Their ability to evoke raw emotion and speak firsthand to public school related issues has the ability to activate their peers and other critical audiences.

TRUST YOUNG PEOPLE “A GREAT DEAL/A LOT” WHEN IT COMES TO ISSUES SURROUNDING PUBLIC SCHOOLS



DO'S, DON'TS, & LANGUAGE NUANCES

Below are key principles to keep in mind as you apply this messaging to your advocacy. You can come back to this table and use it to review your communications.

DO ✓

DO lead with shared values, say what you are for, and highlight success stories to demonstrate what is possible

DO use plain language, such as defining what equity means or saying "honest and accurate education" instead of "CRT"

DO be authentic and use humanizing language to paint a picture your audience can relate to

DO use segmented messaging to mobilize different audiences

DO connect funding to issues beyond education like its impact on students' abilities to get good jobs or on local businesses and communities

DO draw on expertise and experience, utilizing tactics like storytelling to activate powerful student and parent voices

DO evoke freedom on behalf of children

DO be intentional about messengers. Leverage their voice and influence in a targeted way by identifying who they can engage most effectively

DO describe the good things more funding provides: quality teachers, counselors, and healthy meals

DON'T ✗

DON'T feed into cynicism by leading with or focusing entirely on problems

DON'T assume others understand the language we use (e.g., equity)

DON'T use polarizing buzzwords or zero-sum positioning that can alienate audiences

DON'T water down messaging around race in an attempt to be more palatable

DON'T rely on pleas to morality alone or frame this solely as an issue of justice

DON'T tokenize student trauma or suffering

DON'T use a narrative that shifts the focus away from students and their unique experience

DON'T assume the same messengers will resonate with Base and Persuadable audiences equally

DON'T just say funding or resources when describing solutions, which makes people fill in the details on their own

LANGUAGE NUANCES CHEAT SHEET

WHEN POSSIBLE...

Talk about “public education” in place of “public schools.” The word education taps into core positive values that “schools” does not.

Give examples of what funding goes to, such as quality teachers, counselors, and healthy meals, to negate the “blank check” argument.

Say “fix,” rather than “change,” when talking about funding systems. The former implies the system is faulty and is more resonant with audiences.

Use inclusive language when discussing locality (e.g. rural, urban, suburban) over blanket terms like “every zip code.”

Say “funding” instead of “resources” to generate more urgency with persuadables. But when describing solutions, **name the actual resources** that funding provides.

Jargon gets muddled, and **audiences respond better to language that centers people, children and educators.** For example, say “one on one attention,” rather than “instructional time.”

Explain equity rather than say “equity,” using phrases like, “fund schools based on need” over “fund schools equitably.”

This messaging handbook is brought to you by:

The Resource Equity Funders Collaborative, a partnership of education funders committed to equity in PK-12 education. Through a sustained, collective effort, REFC supports state coalitions and national organizations driving deep, wide, and durable change. They create momentum with a grantmaking strategy that supports lasting systemic transformation at all levels of the education system, including state-based efforts, national infrastructure, and federal advocacy and policy development.

REFC partnered with communications and research partners with deep experience in education equity to prepare this messaging guidance:

RALLY is an advocacy communications firm with a record of driving progress around complex political, cultural, and social problems. Since our founding, RALLY has been about action and daring and joining in common cause with those advancing the issues we care about. Those values are reflected in our name and woven throughout our practice.

Lake Research Partners is a nationally recognized qualitative and quantitative research firm. We have over 25 years of experience in all phases of public opinion research. Our principals are leading strategists with experience serving as tacticians and senior advisors to a wide range of elected officials, non-profits, foundations, and progressive issue coalitions across the United States.

HIT Strategies is the leading Millennial & Minority-owned public opinion research firm in Washington, DC that approaches research differently than most conventional research firms. Our innovative approach combined with our cultural speciality make us effective in hard- to-reach communities that other firms under-represent or misunderstand.