About the Opportunity to Learn Campaign

The Opportunity To Learn (OTL) Campaign seeks to instill a new framework for systemic education reform — that all children have a right to the four core resources research has shown are needed to give them a fair and substantive opportunity to learn: access to highly effective teachers, early childhood education, college preparatory curricula, and equitable instructional resources.

The OTL Campaign is a collaborative, multi-state and federal strategy to make the stewards of our nation’s resources accountable for providing those resources — with particular emphasis on a new federal role.

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Introduction

This toolkit is for students, parents, teachers, organizers, advocates and policy makers working to ensure all students have access to a high quality education. It is based on the following tenets:

- All children can learn if given access to the core resources of a quality education.
- It is our shared responsibility to ensure that all children get what they need, regardless of their race, ethnicity or where they live.
- America will be richer, economically, politically and morally, if we provide all children with an opportunity to learn.

The toolkit is built around the values of the Opportunity to Learn Campaign:

- All students have a right to an Opportunity to Learn (civil and human right).
- Families should have safe and educationally sound living and learning environments.
- All community stakeholders should be engaged in creating and maintaining opportunity to learn communities.

In recent years, parents, youth and other stakeholders have successfully shined a light on issues of equity in education and brought greater attention to the challenges facing students in under-resourced schools. Some states and school districts have launched publicly funded pre-school programs, offering a leg up to low-income students before they start kindergarten. Others have implemented tougher curriculum standards and more Advanced Placement classes. Still others have launched specialized magnet schools and pilot programs, designed to turn failing schools around.

But these efforts have produced mixed results, at best. They have not succeeded in improving entire school districts. They do not (and cannot) eliminate the funding disparities between well-resourced and poorly-resourced schools.

This can only be achieved by holding our leaders accountable to a bolder vision that provides all children with an opportunity to learn and by demanding action when they don't. We need a long-term plan to build public will and policy action by shifting the focus of conversation from closing “achievement gaps” to ending “opportunity gaps.”

We will be more successful at reaching broader audiences if we use a shared frame and speak a common language. Doing so will unify and amplify the work that is occurring in places like Chicago, Little Rock, Los Angeles and New York, and help us break through in an age when communications are measured in ever-shorter tweets and sound bites.

In this guide we discuss how to build a more persuasive frame to promote a more comprehensive reform agenda that discusses both “opportunity gaps” and “achievement gaps” as well as the actions policy makers must take to achieve meaningful reforms.
**Framing 101**

**The Frame Defined**
People use mental shortcuts to make sense of the world. These mental shortcuts rely on “frames,” or internalized concepts and values that allow us to accord meaning to unfolding events and new information. These powerful frames can be triggered — intentionally or accidentally — by language choices, strategic messengers and images, which have a profound influence on how people draw conclusions and make decisions.

Frames are deep metaphors, often fixed so deeply in our ways of thinking about the world we aren’t aware they exist. When a frame takes deep root in a culture, it may take decades to reshape or counter it.

In the 1800s, many believed that it was the United States’ role to expand westward and dominate North America. This concept was known as “Manifest Destiny” and it was used to justify the annexation of Texas and the war with Mexico. Although by the 20th century the Manifest Destiny frame had fallen out of favor, the concept remained deeply embedded in the national psyche, seeding the notion that Americans were uniquely positioned to spread democracy throughout the world, which set the stage for the Vietnam War, the Persian Gulf War and the Iraq War.

If a message doesn’t fit into a particular frame — for example, the antiwar movement position that the Vietnamese people could settle their own conflicts — it can be rejected without consideration. And the way that issues and problems are framed has an enormous influence on which solutions are considered.

**Case in Point: Rat Bites Child**

In her book *Prime Time Activism*, Charlotte Ryan discusses three newspaper reports about a rat biting an infant. In one story, the infant was bitten “while his 16-year-old mother went out to cash her welfare check.” Another account reports that there were prior tenant complaints about rats, dismissed by the landlord, who blamed residents for throwing garbage out the window. The third report contextualizes the incident within a larger epidemic of rat attacks in a neighborhood public health workers called the “Zone of Death,” which was exacerbated by government cuts for rat control programs.

In the first case, the article suggests that “welfare moms” are the problem because they leave their children unattended. In the second, either the tenants or the landlord are responsible for the garbage that created the rat problem. In the third, the infestation of rats is perceived as a larger community problem. As Ryan writes, “Every frame defines the issue, explains who is responsible, and suggests potential solutions.”

When crafting strategy for a communications campaign, begin by identifying the existing frames that are being used to discuss your issue. A deep-pocket political campaign might commission polling or focus groups to identify the right frames. But you can do your own public opinion research by: 1) holding a “listening session” with representatives of your target audience; 2) analyzing news articles and broadcasts for dominant frames and 3) supplementing with online “listening” (reading online blogs, Facebook posts, and Twitter messages) — to discover what people are saying.
What Makes a Powerful Frame?
Not all frames are created equal. The most effective and powerful ones:

• **Evoke Shared Values**
The most effective frames focus on shared values, shared experience or shared beliefs about how the world works. These frames are powerful not because they pile on the facts, but because they tell stories featuring vivid characters that audiences can connect to the worldview they already hold. Let’s say you wanted to invoke the *community responsibility* frame in the case of the rat story. Putting forward reams of data about the need for fair housing programs would not be as effective as telling the story of one mother who is angry that her children aren’t safe in their own home.

• **Point People toward an Obvious Choice**
Effective frames also confront audiences with a choice, and the frame makes it obvious what the choice should be. An effective conservative example: You’re either with us or you’re with the terrorists. In a debate over public vs. private schools, you might hear *I believe in public schools but don’t ask me to sacrifice my child’s education to make a political point.*

**Know What You’re Up Against — and Don’t Get Framed**
You need to understand as much about your opponents’ frame as your own. What deep metaphors are their messages evoking? To whom are they appealing? How can you counter their frame with a more powerful one?

The worst thing you can do is try to win the debate by arguing within your opponents’ frame. Rather than countering with facts to prove them wrong, tell an alternative a story that reinforces the values you and your audience have in common. Even briefly repeating the opponents’ frame to reject it — *the issue is jobs, not taxes* — immediately puts you at a disadvantage.

Linguist George Lakoff often opens lectures by telling his audience not to *think of an elephant.* What happens, of course, is that people immediately conjure an elephant in their minds. Lakoff’s point: every word, like *elephant*, evokes a frame. And when we negate a frame, we evoke the frame. Richard Nixon learned this the hard way when he infamously protested, “I am not a crook.”

**Reinforce Your Frame by Getting the Word Out**
Once you’ve selected a powerful frame that connects with your audience, look for every opportunity to put it out there. Every communication is an opportunity to reinforce your frame. Your group’s blog, comments on other blogs, letters to the editor, talk radio, op-eds, press releases, press conferences — all are opportunities to spread your frame more widely to ignite community support and pressure decision makers to do the right thing.

Monitor your progress by continuing to listen to the community, to read articles, blogs and other coverage. They’ll show you whether or not your frame is taking root. Use what you learn to tweak your frame to make it more effective, and repeat as necessary.

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Mapping the Framing Landscape

Frames are long lasting. They cannot be created overnight. Years of negative criticism of public education have severely eroded support for the education system. It will take a long-term effort, carefully crafted, to rebuild the public faith and commitment to fixing education.

To shift the conversation on public education in America, you must begin by assessing the rhetorical landscape — which frames are strengthening support for public education and which are eroding support.

The Four Dominant Frames on Public Education
Research by the FrameWorks Institute\(^2\) found that Americans hold four dominant mindsets on public education. These mindsets are not mutually exclusive: depending on the circumstance, most people form their opinions on public education based on all four frames:

1. **The Neglectful Parent:** “Bad parents — drug or alcohol abusers, welfare recipients, permissive parents, two-career couples — are the problem, not schools. Unless parents get involved, pouring more resources into schools won’t make a difference. Because better school resources can’t fix bad parents, the problem is seen as impossible to solve.”

2. **The Bad Society:** “The breakdown of community values is the problem — drugs, poverty, lack of discipline and lack of respect. Until these issues are dealt with, education will continue to suffer.”

3. **The Free Market:** “Schools are to blame for poor education, not parents or the community. If the schools aren’t succeeding, it’s because teachers and principals are not working hard enough. Schools are like a business, education is a product, and taxpayers need proof that they’re getting what they pay for. If a school is delivering a bad product, its leaders should be replaced, or parents should be free to choose another school.”

4. **The Nurturing Community:** “Society shares responsibility for children’s education because we all have a stake in their success. Test scores are tools to diagnose problems the community needs to fix. All Americans should have the opportunity to get a good education. And it’s society’s responsibility to ensure that everyone has access to that opportunity — including making sure that every school gets the funding it needs.”

Why the Nurturing Community Frame Opens the Door to Real Solutions
The Nurturing Community is the only frame that will ultimately build support for the additional resources that our schools need and deserve. Polling commissioned by FrameWorks found that Americans know the quality of public school education is largely dependent on the community’s income level. But the three other frames, reinforced by the echo chamber, dominate, and are shaping people’s thinking about the causes of poor schooling and the solution.

Framing the Opportunity to Learn

The context for the dominant education debate — as it is for many policy debates today — is one that threatens to further divide our nation. At stake is whether we are going to be one America and support the historic compact that education is the way to level the playing field of inequalities.

In our history, this nation has faced similar choices that could have either divided us or made us a stronger, more unified nation. The Civil War ended slavery. The 30’s Great Depression introduced social programs that continue to this day to support those in need. The 50’s and 60’s tackled segregation. Today, we must address education and opportunity. Solutions that separate people and states, that use competition or lotteries for access to education, rather than ensuring education as a basic civil right, will yield a nation divided. Our country’s future is at the crossroad of opportunity for all or progress for a few. Framing this choice — as an opportunity to learn for all — is the basis for collaborating to build a national movement.

So how can we harness the Nurturing Community mindset in a strategically directed way so that more people reject the harmful and negative alternatives and adopt Nurturing Community as their worldview for how public schools can be improved so all children succeed?

The Opportunity to Learn frame can help.

This frame starts with a core American value: opportunity for all.

By highlighting school equity, the Opportunity to Learn frame seeks to overcome the stereotypes that shape people’s thinking. It affirms that children in poor communities should have the same resources and opportunities to achieve as children in affluent areas, and that more resources can make a difference.

It focuses not on achievement gaps but on opportunity gaps — the fact that, in America, the quality of a child’s education depends greatly on where he or she lives. Instead of focusing on failure, it emphasizes what we know works: access to four core resources (described below). It affirms that all children benefit when resources are fairly distributed.

The frame also places responsibility not just on students, teachers and parents, but on us all — through our elected representatives and other leaders — to create a better future for all kids.
The Opportunity to Learn Frame

**Shared Value**
All children should have the opportunity to get a good education — regardless of where they go to school.

**Solution**
To close the opportunity gap, every kid in America should have access to four basic resources:
- All children should have the opportunity to go to pre-school and all-day kindergarten.
- All children should have the opportunity to be taught by experienced and highly-effective teachers.
- All children should have classes that will prepare them for college and career.
- And all children should have the tools and help they need to learn, including good libraries, computers, tutors, mentors, small classrooms and guidance counselors.

**Vision**
It’s time for America’s public schools to once again be a stepping stone for opportunity in America.
- All students have a right to an Opportunity to Learn (civil and human right).
- Families should have safe and educationally sound living and learning environments.
- Community stakeholders should be engaged in creating and maintaining opportunity to learn communities.

In this guide we discuss how to build a more comprehensive frame to promote a more comprehensive reform agenda that discusses both “opportunity gaps” and “achievement gaps” as well as the actions policy makers must take to achieve meaningful reform.

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**Framing Formula**
When framing, the sequence and flow of your argument is critical: Start with the shared value so you get heads nodding in agreement right off the bat, which will make them more open to hearing what you have to say next.

Next, move to the barrier, but be careful to connect the dots to the shared value so your audience is primed to agree with your assessment of the problem (the opportunity gap).

Present the problem and the solution by using everyday language (basic things that experts say all kids need to learn) and concrete examples (highly-effective teachers and good libraries). Steer clear of the jargon that usually confuses and turns off even the most engaged person.

Finally, end with a vision statement, something inspirational that will evoke pride and that we — including the moderate middle – can all rally behind.

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**Disrupting the Dominant Cultural Frames**
In the next section, we provide a roadmap of what every advocate can do to help displace the dominant cultural frames and ensure that the *Opportunity to Learn* frame takes off.
Choose the Right Messages — and Messengers — to Evoke the Right Frame

Say it in 10 words or less.
Simplicity is the hallmark of effective framing. In other words, short is sweet. How short? You should be able to communicate your main idea in 10 words or less. For instance:

*Every child deserves the opportunity to learn.*

If you keep your message short and simple, everyday citizens will be much more likely to grasp it and repeat it using their own words.

Find the right messengers.
Recruit a diverse set of messengers — from parents and students to teachers and business people. Messengers who symbolize the power of opportunity will be especially effective at delivering messages.

Pack it with values and emotion.
Your message should pack an emotional punch. The Opportunity To Learn frame is built in a way to trigger the human brain’s natural tendency to be altruistic and community-minded. Opportunity is also an enduring American value. The Opportunity Agenda provides the following values-based talking point:

*We are a stronger nation — as well as a more prosperous one — when we expand opportunity for all in America.*

Use language that you can see. And avoid jargon.
It’s hard to see “college-prep curricula,” but you can see “challenging classes that prepare students for college and career” or “computers and good libraries.” You can also see “small classrooms.” Our brains are hardwired to react more strongly to language that evokes a mental picture. As such, use language that creates a picture in the mind of your target audiences.

Focus on easy-to-understand solutions.
Move quickly to solutions. Too many criticisms will turn people off. The Opportunity To learn frame is built around four research-proven resources that all children need to learn — and can be conveyed as easy-to-understand solutions. Work to keep the language simple and conversational. For example,

*All children should have classes that will prepare them for college and career.*
Tell success stories.
To quote the late San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk, “You gotta give ‘em hope.” The “Bad Society” and “Neglectful Parent” frames have made things seem hopeless. Success stories help people believe that change is possible. Just make sure to focus on success stories that spotlight systemic change — rather than individual success. For instance:

As a result of the Abbott Decision, New Jersey schools have ushered in a set of reforms that have given every child the opportunity to learn. Most students now have access to tools they need to learn, including good libraries, computers and smaller classrooms. As a result, test scores are rising for both Black and White students.

Words that Work
Psychologist Drew Westen, author of The Political Brain, has another good view of how frames and effective messages determine what people think about social problems. In just-published research for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Westen and his colleague Elizabeth Cargen examine health disparities in America.

As with FrameWorks' research on education, they found that most Americans do not at first view health as a community responsibility. If someone is overweight or has lung cancer, it’s their own fault for eating or smoking too much. Some people take one step back and blame society, for supersizing fast food and glamorizing cigarettes. Either way, poor health is something that happens to other people and it’s not my concern.

Only when the issue was messaged as giving everyone a fair chance for good health did people make the connection to the role of community. This means giving up terms like eliminating disparities for the language of fairness and choice: opportunities for better choices, providing the tools for better decisions.

Create an Echo Chamber Through the Media

It’s no accident that the dominant cultural frames on public education — Neglectful Parent, Bad Society and Free Market — rule the rhetorical landscape. Advocates who support the political worldview and policy prescriptions aligned with each of those frames use the news media to repeat and reinforce those frames.

If we are to displace these frames, we need to create our own echo chamber. Here are five things you can do to help the Opportunity to Learn frame take off. Below, we use a real-world case study to show effective framing in action.

1. **Start with the headline you want to see.**
   Your press materials — advisories, releases, reports — should echo the headlines you want to see the next day. Fenton worked with The Endowment to choose a name for their report — Healthy Communities Matter — to signal the importance of neighborhoods on the health of boys of color. The headline of their press release — “New Research Shows Neighborhoods Have a Major Influence on the Health of African American, Latino Boys and Young Men” — reinforced the key point of the research. To shift the conversation, it’s helpful to see your framing reflected in the headline and stories you see the next day. Following the release of Healthy Communities Matter, headlines included:

   - Neighborhoods have significant impact on adolescent boys and men of color.
   - The importance of healthy communities for boys of color

2. **Identify the right reporters or the right outlets to help set the frame.**
   To ensure that news stories did not focus exclusively on the health disparities themselves without getting into the why. Fenton reached out to journalists who have a track record of thoughtful coverage that would capture the full scale of the issues. Los Angeles Times reporter Shari Roan was one of them. Roan captured the nuance of the issue in the opening paragraph of her article:

   - The major factor in their poor health, according to a new report by The California Endowment, is where they live. Growing up in poor and stressful neighborhoods with limited healthcare resources leads to poor health.

As newsrooms shrink, landing a solid hit at a major newspaper like the Los Angeles Times will not only influence broadcast coverage, but will likely result in getting picked up by online news sites.
3. Define the issue on your own terms.
Landing a high-profile opinion piece on your issue will help to ensure that you define the parameters of the issue without having to go through a reporter’s filter. As part of the effort to promote Healthy Communities Matter, Robert Phillips, director of health and human services at The Endowment, wrote a blog post for Tavis Smiley’s PBS website, which helped define the issue.

*If you grow up in a neighborhood where you’re not safe, where your school is failing you, and where the nearest park or grocery store is miles away, then you are far more likely to live a shorter life, to earn less money, to be a party or victim of violence. In short, you are far less likely to be healthy.*

*This is an all-too-common reality for far too many of California’s boys and young men of color.*

4. Use social media tools to spread the word.
The era of Twitter and Facebook means that our issues can go farther faster. Robert Phillips’s blog post got much more attention after Tavis Smiley tweeted to his 60,000 followers:

@tavissmiley Twitter: Guest blogger Robert Phillips of @CalEndowment describes the link between neighborhoods & health in boys of color. http://to.pbs.org/aAU895
3:49 PM July 1st

5. Recruit social influencers to promote your message.
Bloggers can help to shape your story the right way. For instance, UrbanMecca.com reported on The Endowment report with the following headline:


You should especially prioritize social influencers who have blogs. For instance, Fenton pitched Marian Wright Edelman, president of the Children’s Defense Fund. She wrote about the report in her Child Watch column, which was reposted elsewhere — including in the Houston Forward Time, The Madison Times and on www.MiamiUrbanLeague.org.
Opportunity to Learn Messaging Toolkit

How the OTL Frame Is Translated in the Real World

To be effective our frame must take root with the real world. It must be translated from our press releases or reports to coverage in our newspapers and local TV news broadcasts. If Opportunity To Learn is to supplant other problematic frames, we must evaluate our own news-making efforts — and take steps to constantly improve the end results.

Below is a checklist of four questions to evaluate your news-making activities. To demonstrate how the checklist works, we use the release of The Schott Foundation’s August 2010 Report, Yes We Can: The Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males as an example. The Schott report, which was promoted by Pro-media Communications, received extensive coverage, including TV, radio, print, blogs and websites. Ideally, your evaluation should include quantitative (how many news stories did you secure?) and qualitative (did the coverage reflect your desired frame?) measures.

1. Did we put our frame front and center in our media materials?

   The Opportunity to Learn frame was embedded throughout all communications, including the report, the website Schott created for the report (www.blackboysreport.org) and the press release. The opening of the report read:

   “. . . [T]here are indeed communities, school districts, and even states doing relatively well in their efforts to systemically enhance the opportunity to learn and raise the achievement levels for Black male students. . . . [But] the overwhelming majority of U.S. school districts and states are failing to make targeted investments to provide the core resources necessary to extend what works for Black male students.”

2. Did our frame make it into the news?

   Headlines largely focused on news of graduation rates. Some headlines focused on the positive:

   “Study: NJ and Newark lead nation in black male graduation rates.” (Washington Post)

   While most headlines focused on the graduation disparities:

   “New York schools get a big fat F when it comes to teaching black male students…” (New York Daily News)

   “Only 47 percent of Black male students graduate high school nationwide, study shows” (Huffington Post)
And the frame was reinforced through sound bites delivered by the Foundation’s President and CEO, Dr. John Jackson:

“It is not enough to focus on saving the few. We must focus on systemic change to provide all our children the opportunity to learn.” (Atlanta Journal-Constitution)

3. Where were our framing successes?

Blogs were more likely to tell the more nuanced story:

“New York State has the worst overall graduation rate for black males at 25 percent. On the other end of the spectrum, amongst states with at least 100,000 black male students in their public schools, New Jersey is able to get nearly 70 percent of these kids through high school on time.” (Good Blog)

“. . . [T]he research on educational outcomes . . . indicates that our income levels influence how stable our homes are and how well our children perform in school. Income also influences how likely our kids are to spend time in jail. In addition, the data show that there are a variety of structural dynamics that also influence outcomes. Universal preschool works wonders, for example, as does the type of comprehensive needs-based program exemplified by the Harlem Children’s Zone.” (NPR Blog)

4. Where were our framing challenges?

Some coverage starkly illustrated how hard it can be to move the news media to a desired frame. Some outlets ignored altogether the causes of low graduation rates, but ran through the data as if they were sports scores. Using flashy computer graphics, a national TV reporter spent most of his report comparing graduation rates in a dozen states. In the closing seconds of his report, when the anchor asked, “What’s going on here?” the reporter said:

“They talk about a court decision that helped lead to [higher graduation rates in New Jersey]; there’s a whole history there. . . I know it’s a lot of numbers. If you take one thing away from this, it’s that these numbers are stark and there’s still a massive gap that needs to be addressed.”

This type of evaluation will help to guide your future news-making endeavors.

For instance, you might change your pitch with the news reporter (or his producer) who failed to shine a spotlight on causes or solutions: “Listen, lots of reporters are going to want to just talk about the numbers, but I think you can tell a different story — what it’s going to take to fix the problem”.

You might also grow the list of bloggers you reach out to because more of them are likely to have the inclination (and the space) to tell a more nuanced story — and to reach key influencers like
**OTL Talking Points**

**Big problems need big solutions**

- America is in a national education and economic crisis — and the two are inter-related.

- The answer is not in playing the “blame game.” Society shares responsibility to provide children the opportunity for a quality education because we all have a stake in their success.

- Far from being first in the world in math and science, the United States ranked thirty-fifth out of the top forty countries in math — right between Azerbaijan and Croatia. In science, the United States ranked twenty-ninth out of forty, sandwiched between Latvia and Lithuania.

- Tinkering at the margins by looking at the success of individual charter schools, for example, will not fix our national crisis. Other countries, which surpass the United States in test scores and college completion, made big fixes in a relatively short amount of time. But they did it by focusing on system reforms, not one school at a time.

**We need bolder and broader approaches to provide all students an opportunity to learn**

- The education crisis our nation faces extends beyond fixing individual schools. If we address our Big Problems with Big Solutions, we remain globally competitive. If not, our nation’s future looks dim.

- Ultimately, federal accountability is needed to ensure that all students in all states have a fair and substantive opportunity to learn. State remedies have not been sufficient to address the deep inequities in educational opportunity found both within and across states.

- A federal role is essential to ensure all students are guaranteed a fair and substantive opportunity to learn as a civil right.

- In 1930, following the economic crash, President Hoover declined to meet the nation’s Big Challenges with a Big Solutions agenda. Instead, he encouraged localities to develop their own solutions. The national unemployment rate ballooned from 8% to 23% until President Franklin Roosevelt took office and developed policy solutions with a greater force and changed the course of history.

- Every several decades, our country is faced with a choice of whether we will be a nation united or divided. The Civil War ended slavery. The 30’s Great Depression introduced social supports. The 50’s and 60’s tackled segregation. Today, we must address education and opportunity. If we continue to offer solutions that separate people and states, we will be a nation divided and a nation at risk.
Our country’s future is at the crossroad of opportunity for all or progress for a few. The path we take is critical. The answer is not in a lottery, nor Superman, but in solutions that give all our children an opportunity to learn and creates one America.

**Systemic solutions must involve universal access to research-proven resources**

- In New Jersey, after the Abbott decision — which equalized resources for all New Jersey’s schools — graduation and achievement scores for all students rose, based on national standards.

- To close the opportunity gap, every student in America must have access to four basic things:
  - ✓ All children should have the opportunity to go to pre-school and all-day kindergarten. We’ve known for years that this works, so why not guarantee it to all our children? A child who starts school ready to learn and is literate by third grade has lasting positive outcomes.
  - ✓ All children should have the opportunity to be taught by experienced and highly effective teachers.
  - ✓ All children should have classes that will prepare them for college and career.
  - ✓ All children should have the tools and help they need to learn, including good libraries, computers, small classrooms, guidance counselors, mentors and tutors.

**Charters alone are an inadequate solution for the size of this problem — they will leave most kids behind**

- Charters have a place in our educational landscape, but they only educate 4% of U.S. children. The fastest growing system of charters is in New York, with 22% growth and only educates 2% (21,000) of New York City’s over one million students. To expand this program nationally would take roughly 150 years to meet all our students’ needs.

- Charter schools are often touted as the “Silver Bullet,” but these efforts have produced mixed results, at best. They do not (and will not) eliminate the funding disparities between well-resourced and poorly-resourced schools. According to one recent and highly regarded study, only 17% of charter schools do better than regular public schools and 36% do significantly worse.

- We don’t need a “Superman” nor a few “Super Schools,” we need “Super Systems” capable of rescuing tens of thousands of young people each year.

**Education is a civil right**

- All students have a right to an opportunity to learn, not as a matter of competition or location, but as a civil and human right.
• It can’t depend on a lottery. We must guarantee all students access to high quality early education, highly effective teachers, college and work-preparatory curricula and equitable instructional resources like good school libraries and small classes. A right without a clear map of what that right protects is an empty statement.

**Zip codes should not determine the quality of a child’s education**

• All children should have the opportunity to get a good education — regardless of where they live.

**Funding education based on property taxes creates inequities**

• We are the only industrialized nation that uses property tax to fund its school system and the consequences are devastating. In America, zip codes determine educational opportunity. We must strive to bring more equity to the public school system, including exploring alternatives to property tax financing.

• Educational resources are distributed inequitably across and within states, for example:
  ✓ Average per student expenditure, by state, varies from $6,000 in Utah to $18,000 in New Jersey.
  ✓ In Connecticut, per student expenditure by district varies from $4,000 to $31,000; in Texas it varies from $3,000 to $28,000.

**Blaming teachers won’t solve this problem**

• Teachers are so important to our students’ success we must find a way to stop the blame game and instead focus on supports that will improve the quality and effectiveness of our teaching force.

• Teachers want their students to be successful, but often are not granted appropriate planning time or on-going professional development, and too often are asked to teach out of their subject area.

• Every school should match new and less experienced teachers with mentor teachers to guide their skills development and evaluate their effectiveness.

• If teachers and unions were the problem, schools and students in non-union “right to work” states in the South would do better, but that is not the case.

**Opportunity gap vs. achievement gap**

• For the past two decades, the nation has focused on standards and testing to close student achievement gaps; however, if we had been as committed to reducing the opportunity gap from the onset we would not see the achievement gap as stark as it is today.
• Originally the Standards Movement was known as Opportunity to Learn Standards.

• Students living in poverty and from historically disadvantaged groups have only half the opportunity to attend schools with adequate educational resources than other students.

• There is only a 15% chance that a Black student will be able to attend a well-resourced, high-performing school. There is only a 17% chance for a Latino student or a student from a poor family.

• There is a 42% chance that a Black student will find his or herself assigned to a poorly-resourced, low-performing school. Thirty-five percent of Latinos and 34% of poor students are in these drop-out factories.

• We should not, cannot and must not be satisfied with a 50% opportunity rate. If we told corporate America that 50% of their product would fail, they would retool, rethink or remove themselves from the market.

• We must use the current opportunities, particularly those available under ARRA, to ensure our schools retool, rethink and refocus resources, ensuring every student has equal access to a high-quality public education. Not doing so has dire consequences with immense long-term implications.

**Ultimately, federal accountability is needed to ensure that all students in all states have a fair and substantive opportunity to learn**

• State remedies have not been sufficient to address the deep inequities in educational opportunity found both within and across states. A federal role is essential to ensure all students are guaranteed a fair and substantive opportunity to learn as a civil right.

• In 1930, following the economic crash, President Hoover declined to meet the nation’s Big Challenges with a Big Solutions agenda. Instead, he encouraged localities to develop their own solutions. The national unemployment rate ballooned from 8% to 23% until President Franklin Roosevelt took office and developed policy solutions with a greater force and changed the course of history.

**There are enormous economic consequences for failing to provide an opportunity to learn**

• The costs to the nation of educational inequity are enormous. Each year they are:
  ✓ $82 billion in lost lifetime earnings
  ✓ $37 million in decreased tax revenue
  ✓ $12 billion in losses due to poor health
  ✓ $8 billion in losses due to increased crime rates

• The potential return on the investment needed to give every child an equal opportunity to learn is 250%.
• There is a direct correlation between not completing high school and one’s chances for going to prison. To interrupt this devastating cycle we need to make sure those neighborhoods and communities most vulnerable get the most support. We can either invest in student supports and mentors now or, at a much higher cost, parole officers later.

• If the U.S. is to be globally competitive, we need college graduates, not prison inmates.

The national policy debates must engage key community voices, including parents, young people and teachers

• Parents and youth have a lot to say about what works and what does not. They are an essential part of shaping education reform that directly affects their lives. We must strive to ensure their voices are heard by policy makers and not left out of the echo chamber of 24-hour news cycles.

• In the past ten to fifteen years, the parent and youth education organizing movements across the country have grown and they have also created some of the best solutions to the failure of schools in their communities. Parents in the South Bronx created New York’s Lead Teacher program, in Chicago they created Grow Your Own, and in Sacramento, the Home Visiting program. The Annenberg Institute for School Reform’s research shows that schools are stronger and have better outcomes when the community is engaged.

• Public services like health care, housing and social security help children from disadvantaged backgrounds do well in school. Any large system needs strategic, robust and knowledgeable leadership to support and connect schools with communities.
Talking with People of Faith about Opportunity to Learn

The National Council of Churches is a leading partner in efforts to address opportunity gaps in our nation’s schools and provide all children with an Opportunity to Learn.

The Council’s Committee on Public Education and Literacy developed the publications on the following pages for outreach to church members and for use as an insert in Sunday church bulletins. The Committee has granted permission to reprint these materials as resources for organizers and advocates around the country. (See http://www.nccusa.org/elmc/specialministries.htm#anchorwgpel.)
Opportunity Gaps in Public Education Must Be Closed
A Resource of the National Council of Churches Committee on Public Education and Literacy

As Congress prepares for the long overdue reauthorization of the federal education law, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, faithful citizens are called to speak for eliminating injustices in the current version, No Child Left Behind, passed in the fall of 2001 with the stated goal of closing achievement gaps. Among the most serious of the current law’s many problems is that NCLB has ratcheted up standardized testing and punished schools that cannot quickly raise scores while remaining silent about providing the resources to guarantee that every child has an equal opportunity to learn.

What are opportunity gaps?

Opportunity gaps are the differences in resources that society provides for children and schools from place to place. Despite more than 30 years of lawsuits in more than 40 states and the improved funding they have brought, inequity in funding for public education between wealthy and poor school districts remains 3:1 in most states. State school finance systems, still heavily reliant on local property taxes, only magnify disparities in family resources in an America where some children live in pockets of concentrated poverty and others in pockets of concentrated affluence. In a major 1999 policy statement, the National Council of Churches General Assembly lifts up opportunity gaps as a primary injustice:

“The wide disparities among public schools exist largely because schools reflect the affluence and/or the political power of the communities in which they are found. Within virtually every state there are school districts that lavish on their students three or four times the amount of money spent on other children in the same state. Most telling, the schools that offer the least to their students are often schools serving poor children, among whom children of color figure disproportionately, as they do in all the shortfalls of our common life.”

Congress must ensure that every child, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status has an opportunity to learn that includes:

- **a quality early childhood education**—Some states give all children the right to publicly subsidized, quality pre-school; in other states children lack pre-school and all day Kindergarten.
- **highly qualified teachers**—Some school districts can afford well-qualified, experienced teachers; in other districts where salaries are lower or conditions challenging, students are too often taught by a succession of substitute teachers.
- **a curriculum that will prepare students for college, work and community**—Some high schools offer Calculus, advanced lab sciences, and Advanced Placement. Others lack lab sciences even though these courses are required by their state universities.
- **equitable instructional resources**—Some schools have adequate libraries, computers, enough counselors to assist with college placement, and small classes. In other over-crowded schools personal attention is not guaranteed, and important programs and equipment are unaffordable.

Our faith calls us to care for children

Jesus valued children. National Council of Churches General Secretary, Michael Kinnamon reminds us: “Each and every child is the earth’s most precious resource, an amazing gift from God. This, of course, is not how they were regarded in Roman culture at the time of Jesus, which is why some of the stories found in the gospels would have been utterly shocking to the original audience. My favorite is from Mark 9: ‘Then Jesus took a little child and put it among them. And taking the child in his arms, he said to them [the
disciples], ‘whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the One who sent me,’ … Little children… are the representatives, the ambassadors, of Jesus and, thus, of God! They are to be welcomed, cared for, because of their special relationship with our Lord… This is part of the eschatological reversal of scripture: Greatness is redefined as caring for, as receiving, the most vulnerable among us.”

**Justice Waits**

Caring for children means caring for the public schools that serve 50 million (90 percent) of our young people; yet public education in the United States has only become more politically embattled since the NCC General Assembly adopted its 1999 Policy Statement. In the fall of 2001, Congress passed a new reauthorization of the federal education law that ignored school inequity and failed to address the comprehensive needs that affect children’s ability to achieve in school. Ironically this law that we call “No Child Left Behind” has created a system in which more and more children are being left behind.

In a 2005 statement, “Ten Moral Concerns in the No Child Left Behind Act,” the NCC Committee on Public Education and Literacy pointed to the law’s serious injustices that: radically increased standardized testing; demanded rapidly increasing test scores for all children; punished the schools unable to raise scores quickly; blamed teachers; failed to accommodate the needs of English language learners and children with special needs; narrowed the curriculum to the subjects tested; imposed a rigid and utopian 2014 deadline when all children would score proficient or their schools would be labeled “failures”; and remained silent about opportunity gaps by making “demands on states and school districts without fully funding reforms that would build capacity to close achievement gaps. To enable schools to comply with the law’s regulations and to create conditions that will raise achievement, society will need to increase… funding for the schools that serve our nation’s most vulnerable children…”

NCLB’s test-and-punish strategy has distracted our attention from the opportunity gaps beneath the achievement gaps. By mandating higher test scores while remaining silent about unequal resources, federal policy makers framed an agenda that can only be interpreted as an attack on educators themselves, passing the buck from Congress to the schools and demanding that teachers and children work harder and thereby compensate for society’s structural injustices. NCLB’s silence about opportunity to learn—about the public’s responsibility to invest in equity—is among the law’s most serious flaws.

**What specific federal reforms will ensure an opportunity to learn for all children?**

In the upcoming reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Congress should **allocate federal resources for equity** and use its power to **press states to close opportunity gaps**. Congress should:

- Fully fund Title I in accord with the current formula. Congress has never kept its promise to fund what NCLB requires. By the fall of 2008, the seven year cumulative underfunding of NCLB was $71 billion.
- Provide strong federal incentives for states to reform inequitable school funding formulas.
- Establish a comprehensive school funding indicator system under which states report data about spending patterns across and within school districts including access to core opportunities like early childhood education, qualified teachers, challenging curriculum, and instructional resources.
- Require states to develop plans for overcoming resource inequity and document their progress toward the goals they have themselves established.
- Create a transparent, regular federal report that exposes the scope of unequal access to opportunity.

Congress must ensure that public schools in all communities can promise every child an opportunity to learn.
Opportunity to Learn in Public Education: 
An Alternative Vision

Caring for children means caring for the public schools that serve 50 million (90 percent) of our young people in the United States.

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As Congress prepares for the long overdue reauthorization of the federal education law, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, faithful citizens are called to speak for eliminating injustices in the current version, No Child Left Behind, passed in the fall of 2001 with the stated goal of closing achievement gaps. Among the most serious of the current law’s many problems is that NCLB has ratcheted up standardized testing and punished schools that cannot quickly raise scores while remaining silent about providing the resources to guarantee that every child has an equal opportunity to learn.

Opportunity gaps are the differences in resources that society provides for children and schools from place to place. Despite more than 30 years of lawsuits in more than 40 states and the improved funding they have brought, inequity in funding for public education between wealthy and poor school districts remains 3:1 in most states. State school finance systems, still heavily reliant on local property taxes, only magnify disparities in family resources in an America where some children live in pockets of concentrated poverty and others in pockets of concentrated affluence.

NCLB’s test-and-punish strategy has distracted us, drawing our attention to test scores and away from the opportunity gaps beneath the achievement gaps.

By mandating higher test scores while remaining silent about unequal resources, federal policy makers framed an agenda that can only be interpreted as an attack on educators themselves, passing the buck from Congress to the schools and demanding that teachers and children work harder and thereby compensate for society’s structural injustices.

NCLB’s silence about opportunity to learn—about the public’s responsibility to invest in equity—is among the law’s most serious flaws. In the reauthorization of the federal education law, Congress should address the injustice of vast inequality of opportunity by:

- Fully funding Title I, the federal funding stream that was created to support public schools that serve many children in poverty, in accord with the current formula.
- Providing strong federal incentives for states to reform inequitable school funding formulas.
- Establishing a comprehensive school funding indicator system where states would report spending patterns from school district to school district about access to core opportunities like early childhood education, qualified teachers, challenging curriculum, and instructional resources.
- Requiring states to develop plans for overcoming resource inequity and documenting their progress toward the goals they have themselves established.
- Creating a transparent, regular federal report that exposes the scope of unequal access to opportunity.

Congress must ensure that public schools in all communities can promise every child an opportunity to learn.
Students Stage Walkout Over Textbooks, Science Labs
115 Youth Visit Capitol to Demand Opportunity to Learn

CLEVELAND, Oct. 1 – More than 100 teenage students, joined by dozens of teachers and parents, walked out of Cleveland schools yesterday, boarded buses to Columbus and held a spirited rally at the Capitol demanding an opportunity to learn.

The walkout and rally were in reaction to a recent school board decision to cut spending on instructional resources, such as textbooks, computers, and science labs.

“We already are working with outdated textbooks and computers,” said Anna Ramirez, one of the student leaders. “In our science labs, we have so much broken equipment that only half the class gets to do experiments. The rest of us just sit around doing nothing.”

Students said they came to the Capitol because they were tired of hearing Cleveland officials say they could not solve the problem. Eleventh-graders from Mary Cann’s social studies class did a research project on school spending and found that some suburban districts spend twice as much per student as is spent in their schools.

The students interviewed members of the Cleveland School Board and learned that Cleveland takes in fewer taxes, on a per person basis, than neighboring suburbs. That’s not likely to change, they said, without action from state policy makers.

“Why should I go to a worse school just because of where I live?” asked Jonathan Booker, an 11th-grader.

Booker and his classmates visited the office of Rep. Vincent Markham to ask for more state funding for inner-city schools. “Our teachers can’t do their jobs with old textbooks and broken lab equipment,” Booker said. “My social studies book is older than I am. When it was published, the Berlin Wall had just come down and no one had ever heard of Al Qaeda.”

Cann, the 11th-grade teacher, questioned why teachers and students are always asked to do more with less. She applauded the recent focus on accountability in public schools, but she thinks the public should hold policy makers accountable too.

“These kids are our future,” she said. “It shouldn’t matter whether they are black, white or brown, or whether they live in Cleveland or West Lake. They all deserve a fair chance.”

Juan Marshall of the Campaign for Public Schools said research shows there are four key components needed to provide children with a fair and substantive Opportunity to Learn:

• A quality pre-school education
• Highly effective teachers
• Classes that will prepare them for work or college
• Quality instructional resources, such as books, computers and science labs

For more about the Opportunity to Learn Campaign, go to www.OTLCampaign.org.
Letters to the editor should be short, ideally fewer than 200 words (the letter below is 124 words). The chances of being published are greater if the letter is tied to a timely event, especially something that has recently been in the newspaper. Most newspapers now allow you to submit your letters by e-mail.

Name of news outlet
Street address
City, State, Zip code
Phone number
Email address

Oct. 1, 2010

Editor:

Lost amid reports on the latest round of test scores was discussion of what research shows is a main reason for the wide gaps in school achievement: a vast imbalance in resources between rich and poor schools.

When will our leaders and decision makers acknowledge that it takes resources to improve our public schools? Experts agree that kids need four basic things to succeed in school: high-quality preschools, effective teachers, classes that will prepare them for work and college and, above all, adequate resources.

Reform cannot just focus on raising scores. We must also devote the resources needed to give students a fair shot to succeed.

We have a long way to go to ensure quality in all our public schools. Let’s get started.

Signed,
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Town/City, State
Communications Resources

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