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No Community Left Behind: Changing the Conversation About Public School Reform

By Meg Bostrom, Public Knowledge LLC
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Method

This report is based on an analysis of six focus groups conducted with engaged citizens, i.e., people who say they: are registered to vote, read the newspaper frequently, are involved in community organizations, and have recently contacted a public official or spoken out on behalf of an issue. In each location, one focus group was conducted with parents of children in the public schools, and one focus group was conducted with those who currently have no children in the public schools. The groups were conducted in the following locations:

- Hartford, CT -- suburban citizens, May 29, 2003
- Nashville, TN -- rural citizens, May 31, 2003
- Baltimore, MD -- urban citizens, June 3, 2003

Throughout the report, focus group participants are noted by their location, gender and parental status. For example, a woman with a child in the public schools in suburban Hartford is cited as “CT mother” while a woman in the same location without children in the public schools is cited as “CT woman.”

In all the groups, participants experienced exploratory conversations about education, the No Child Left Behind Act, and policies to improve education. After the exploratory conversations, participants reviewed a series of messages about the No Child Left Behind Act and related education policy recommendations. The focus group guide is included in the Appendix.

Strategic Overview

The Bush Administration's signature education reform legislation, the No Child Left Behind Act, could transform public education for years to come. The question is, will the transformation benefit society or harm it? The Administration is advancing a perspective that places all responsibility on individuals – individual principals and teachers will be held accountable for each student's achievement, and each student, no matter their disability or life circumstances, is expected to achieve at high levels. If achievement does not occur, it is because educators did not try hard enough, and they will have to face the consequences. Disparities in resources are invisible. Even the name, No Child Left Behind, centers attention on the individual.

Education advocates, however, have a different worldview for reform. In their worldview, communities matter. It is not enough to help one child achieve – all children should have an opportunity for the best education possible. Disparities in resources constrain achievement, not the will of teachers or principals. Instead of punishing schools, communities should have a stake in supporting and developing schools.

This analysis reports on existing public perceptions of education, explores the structure of the public's thinking on this issue, and suggests approaches that will allow education advocates to communicate effectively about the No Child Left Behind Act.

Clearly, the public is discouraged by what they see and hear about the nation's public schools. They believe that children graduate high school without the ability to read. They see the United States falling behind other countries. They worry that nobody has a plan for solving the ills facing the nation's schools.

Since few have heard much about federal efforts to reform education, advocates can put their energies toward framing the implementation of the Act, rather than trying to re-educate Americans about its principles. In fact, a discussion of the Act's principles of standards and accountability are likely to put education advocates at a disadvantage. Instead, advocates should center their energies on defining the objective of testing as targeting resources for additional help, and defining the steps necessary to place a qualified teacher in every classroom.

The public comes to this issue with four dominant ways of thinking about public education. These are not mutually exclusive; most people express views related to each mindset under certain circumstances. Three of these frames of mind provide an advantage to those advocating NCLB, while one, the Nurturant Community, provides an opportunity for those who want to redefine the implementation of the Act.

Neglectful Parents – in this mindset, people see uninvolved parents as the problem facing education. Until parents get involved, additional resources will not make a difference.

Bad Society – in this mindset, society is the problem, and until drugs, crime, and lack of respect are dealt with, education will suffer.

Market-Based Accountability – in this frame of mind, education is like a product or service, and tests are used to prove that the service is being delivered. If the service is flawed, consumers can make another choice, i.e., public school choice, and the service provider should be forced to fix the product or be punished. Additional resources are a non-issue; educators should try harder.

Nurturant Community – in this mindset, people see community responsibility for schools, and view testing as a way to diagnose where the problems are occurring in the community. The expectation is that resources will be tailored to fix the unique set of issues that a school or district faces.

These frames of mind emerge consistently as focus group participants react to specific policy recommendations. It is not enough to communicate a popular policy. The public makes decisions about policies based on broader values and ways of understanding an issue. To advance appropriate reform, advocates will need to develop communications that strengthen the Nurturant Community frame of mind. Such communications will require the following:

1. Focus communications on being proactive, not defensive. Talk about the right ways to implement reform.
2. Eliminate the language of Market-Based Accountability.
3. Set the context as the broader community, not the individual and not an ethnic group.
4. Indicate that education reform is about opportunity for all children and a better future for us all.
5. Highlight solutions – we know how to educate and we know what needs to be done.
6. Position tests as diagnostic measures, not testing for accountability.
7. Remind people of what is working, so the best of education in America is not destroyed.
8. Bring teachers into the discussion.

Finally, this research indicates that education advocates need to be concerned about long-term public support for education. Years of criticism of public education have resulted in an image of the public schools that is so poor that support for the system is being undermined. Without a long-term strategy for building support for public schools, education advocates will find themselves battling even more efforts to privatize public education.

Perceptions of the Public Schools

Across all of the focus groups -- urban, suburban and rural, those with children in the public schools and those without -- participants expressed deep concern and frustration with public schools. Focus group participants have a sense that the United States is falling behind the rest of the world and that schools could perform much better than they are. Many believe that “Johnny Can’t Read.” “Kids are graduating because they are 17, 18. You can’t have a 21-year-old who can’t read still be a senior in high school,” according to one CT mother in the focus groups. “They just keep moving them through the system,” responded another.

Focus group participants also recognize that school quality varies greatly from one area to the next. They frequently see standardized test scores in their local paper and agree upon which areas in their respective states have “good” and “bad” schools. They agree that urban schools fare the worst, and tend to blame uninvolved parents who raise undisciplined children. Many do not understand enough about how public schools are funded to view disparities in education funding as an issue.

There are some distinct differences across the groups as well. Participants in suburban Connecticut and rural Tennessee are generally more optimistic than those in urban Baltimore, MD. Parents of children in the public schools are more optimistic about local public schools and are more supportive of increased funding than those without children in public schools. In fact, adults without children in public schools are so adamantly negative about the state of public schools, and so convinced that the problems lie with bad parents and wasted tax dollars, that it is difficult to imagine that they could be energized to advocate on behalf of public education.

The testing and accountability provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) are positioned to make perceptions of public schools even worse. Most parents in the focus groups report feeling optimistic about their child’s school. However, if their school failed state standards, most parents say they would question the quality of the school, not the nature of the test. If, as indicated, NCLB standards are set very high, many above average schools will fail to meet standards and those who currently rate their schools positively are likely to change their opinion once test results begin to be publicized.

These declining public perceptions may undermine support for public schools. On most social issues, advocates assume that if people believe a problem is severe, they will act to address it. In fact, in many instances people become so overwhelmed by the scope of the problem that they believe it cannot be addressed. While most focus group participants are completely committed to the future of public schools, a significant number indicate that they believe the problems have become too complex to fix. “How long do you keep throwing good money after bad?” a CT woman asked. “If on balance the public school system really sucks,” a MD man asserted, “no amount of money that you pour into it, unless the public decides that all of a sudden the tide has turned and these schools are really good schools, are you going to get a reversal.”

Note the following conversation among TN citizens who do not have children in the public schools. They express that they are ready to eliminate public schools and make the system private:

To me, key word, 'proud American tradition.'

We lost that tradition.

Exactly.

A long time ago.

Moderator: We have no pride in our public schools?

No.

No. [talkover] . . .put all their children in private school, why not make the whole system private?

Exactly.

Get rid of the teachers union. Then you've got private schools that are run by the private thing. Now if we're going to put our money into it, let's put the money into getting the education we really want.

This is an extreme view, and if privatizing schools were proposed in their community, it is not clear that these citizens would stand by their statements. However, it is clear that support for public education is beginning to be undermined. In the following quote, a MD man reluctantly expresses his concern that perhaps it is time to completely overhaul education:

I think all the comments that were made today come from a group of people that I would guess were educated in the public educational system. Now the government is talking about rearranging that system from whence we all came, and it is new to us. The whole idea is new and it might be a great idea, and it might be a lousy idea. The past idea in the last two decades has not seemed to work in terms of public education. Therefore, this whole voucher system or this whole accountable system might be the way even though I personally love the public school system because it turned out me and my sons, a great education and great lives and very successful. Yet, it might not be the way to go in the 21st century, and it might be time for a change and this could be the change.

While this research was designed to address NCLB, it raises a question that advocates will have to answer for the long-term. Is the image of public education becoming so eroded that future public support will be undermined?

The remainder of this section describes four dominant frames of mind that the public brings to this issue: Neglectful Parents, Bad Society, Market-Based Accountability, and Nurturant Community. The first three mindsets lead to public support for the NCLB, while the fourth allows people to see other solutions for the ills facing education. Readers should note that while these four dominant mindsets occurred in every focus group, focus group participants do not hold any one mindset exclusively. People can hold competing ways of thinking about an issue, and each mindset can be triggered by

particular language or references. For example, a person can see day care as warehousing children while their self-centered parents work, but also see pre-school as a stimulating opportunity for children to experience social, emotional, and cognitive development. One person can hold these conflicting views at the same time, and have one or the other triggered through communications.

Fully understanding the frames of mind that people bring to this issue assists the development of effective communications, since it can help advocates understand which traps to avoid, which language to develop, and why those communications choices help to illuminate particular policy options.

Neglectful parents

The Neglectful Parent frame of mind is characterized by expressions that parents are the problem facing education, and schools are simply dealing with the impact of bad parents. “Bad parents” include a range of stereotypes:

- welfare recipients who are irresponsible in their own lives and do not value work or education;
- drug or alcohol abusers who abandon their children;
- lenient parents who do not discipline and who let their children do, or have, anything they want; and
- neglectful parents who are more interested in their career than their kids.

The result of this mindset is an emphasis on individual responsibility, not societal responsibility. Focus group participants expressing this mindset believe that here is little that can be done, other than hope that the parents of future generations do a better job, or force parents to become involved. Schools have to deal with disciplinary issues because parents do not teach children appropriate values. Allowing stricter discipline in schools, to pick up where parents are failing, is one solution that results from this frame of mind. In this way of thinking, public school choice is both supported and undermined as a solution. “Good parents” should be allowed to choose another school, but these faulty kids may drag the good school down if they are allowed to transfer.

Parents are the problem. When operating in the Neglectful Parent frame of mind, focus group participants blame poor parenting for schools’ ills. “The parents do not take responsibility for their children and they do not raise these children to be responsible for their actions and accountable for their own actions,” a CT woman complained. “If you bring a student into a school who has some responsibility for himself and displays some kind of accountability then that teacher is going to be able to teach that child.” “If you have a disciplinary problem,” another added, “you call the parent. They won’t even show up for a meeting.”

They critique a range of stereotypical parents. Most frequently, focus group participants critique low-income minority parents, the stereotypical welfare mother, as not being

engaged in education. “Even the low income and the minorities,” a TN mother asserted, “when you are going to the schools that are in the bad areas, those children, don't get me wrong there are children there who can succeed. But for the most part the poor children, their parents don't care and they don't care.” Another example of neglectful parenting is the dual income working couple that put career before family. “What percentage of the parents put their kids in day care to start with?” a CT woman queried. “That's where the whole thing starts. You just dump your kid on somebody to baby-sit.” “The issue in the family unit is two parents are working,” a MD man explained. “There is no way that they have the time ...these kids are there at 7 in the morning. They are picked up at 6 o'clock at night. Both parents are working and there is no way. To get them to come pick their kid up if they are sick, you've got a tough job on your hands.”

Money won't fix it. If parental values are the problem, then calls for increased education budgets make no sense. Money cannot fix neglectful parents. “It doesn't matter how much money you throw,” a MD mother argued, “when you've got kids who come from an environment where their families do not value education, they can learn at school and they go home and there is nobody to reinforce. There is nobody who cares that they went to school, or help with homework or any of that stuff.” “You can't just throw money at the system. “I think it's not a money problem really,” a MD man remarked. “It's a social problem, a parent problem as we said before. But just throwing money in there is not going to do the job.”

If there is a solution, it resides with parents. Once the central problem facing schools is defined as parents, focus group participants struggle with how to address the problem. To many, it is overwhelming and unfixable. Note the following conversation among CT residents who do not have children in the public schools:

I just keep going back to the parents with this school business.

But how do we deal with it?

You can't.

I don't see where you can either. I don't see a cure for that.

You can't because it's a tough situation. It has to do with responsibility, accountability -- the whole bit.

If parents are the problem, then fixing parents is the logical solution. Forced involvement in the schools or punitive measures become viable alternatives. “I think mandatory [involvement],” a MD man suggested. “I can see a parent having to spend one day every 90 days in the school system.” “Well I heard,” a CT mother stated, “and I don't even know what state or whatever, that they were holding parents accountable for children missing school and they were actually fining them. I don't know if there was jail or anything but based on your child's behavior in school, the parent was the one that paid the price.”

Strong, committed parents can help children overcome disadvantages. “I think the problem lies at the home and the social fabric of the home,” a MD man explained. “You see so many cases of poor, economically disenfranchised or poor children who become great

brain surgeons whether they are minority or not because they have a very strong guiding parent at home.”

Kids need discipline. When operating in the neglectful parent frame, focus group participants see a lack of discipline as a cause of the problems facing schools. “That’s where you need to go after the parents,” a TN man noted. “Don’t blame the children for acting up. It’s the parents.” “Well, it comes down to the parents to do something about it,” a TN remarked. “If the parents are disciplining a child, then the child will act right in school.”

To address this issue, they believe that schools should be able to discipline children more severely. “They can’t spank,” a TN mother complained. “All they can do is like a slap on the wrist. They can’t even do that. All they can do is reprimand and put them in, in school suspension. What does that do? I happen to personally believe in spare the rod, spoil the child.” “When I got in trouble at school and I got threatened that you’re going to the principal and get a paddling, that straightened it up real quick,” a TN man remembered. “I used to tell my son,” a CT man described, “I said don’t come home and tell me that the teacher hauled off and belted you one because I’ll tell him to hit you harder.”

Disciplinary measures include removing problem students. Children who have not been raised well should be removed to a different, more disciplined setting, they believe. “I feel like there are some kids that are going to learn no matter what and there are some bad eggs,” a MD woman stated. “Put them in boot camp. What happens to them happens.”

A good student deserves better. School choice becomes an acceptable solution for attentive parents whose children are good students. Because they are focused on the individual child, their needs predominate. “If your child is zoned for a school that is not up to par,” a TN man suggested, “it’s not fair to that child.” “If it was my child,” a TN woman remarked, “I don’t have children, but I would want my child to go to the best one. Who cares? I want him to go to the better school.” School choice gives good parents an alternative.

Bad Society

Closely related to the Neglectful Parent mindset is the Bad Society mindset. In this frame of mind, society or community values are the problem, and schools are dealing with the impact of a worsening society. Most frequently, focus group participants critique the values of people in poor communities. However, they are also concerned about changing American values that affect education. When operating in this mindset, people see that schools are trying their best to deal with the impact of these problems, but the problems are perhaps too difficult to address.

Society is the problem. Focus group participants see urban centers as having the worst schools, and believe one cause is crime and drugs. “I think it is hard to pick on the school system,” a MD father suggested. “Baltimore City is plagued with a lot of problems. It’s a high crime area and high drug, so you are not just going to correct the education problem when you have a lot of problems in Baltimore City.” A second cause of failing schools in

urban centers, according to focus group participants, is a lack of values such as responsibility. “Your tax dollars do go to raise these communities up,” a TN man complained, “but you've got people in the communities who don't appreciate what they have, who don't hesitate to bust windows out of houses and stuff like that. They don't care because everything has been given to them and if everything that you have is given to you, you do not appreciate. If you have to work for it and buy it with your own money, you are going to appreciate it and you are going to take care of it.”

When they compare American society to other countries, some raise questions about whether or not Americans take education seriously enough. “We taught Japan a lot of other things that they do, and they took our ideas and ran with them,” a TN man asserted. “We've changed our ideas and look at our country. Look at theirs.... They go to school seven days a week and when they get ready to graduate high school, if they don't succeed -- fact not fiction, if they don't succeed and get into the college, there is a very high rate of possibility they will try to commit suicide because education is so important to them. That's why they are so successful.”

Teachers do not get respect. Lack of respect and lack of discipline are perceived causes of the problems facing schools. “It's a social issue there,” a MD man explained. “Teachers don't have the authority they used to have. They don't have the respect they used to have.” “In the days that I was growing up you feared your teacher,” a CT mother stated. “You feared authority. You feared your parents, so you did well. Kids have nothing to fear anymore.” “Schools are getting dangerous,” a TN mother noted. “I mean they feel like they are taking their lives into their own hands because there is so little they can do to discipline.”

This problem is too big to solve. When operating in a Bad Society frame, the problems seem complex and overwhelming. “I don't know how they are going to change the social problem,” a MD man remarked. “I'm not so sure they can change that social problem overnight with just money.” Furthermore, addressing these societal problems is not about monetary resources. “It isn't funding,” a CT father explained. “It's got to be a social change. Like our parents' generation -- cocktail parties, drinking/driving, everybody did it, right? Now, no. There's been a social change over 20 or 30 years. Well, we have to get parents involved again in the education and the emphasis has to be risen. There has to be social changes. Just putting money on the bottom 10 percent is not going to cut it.”

In the Bad Society mindset public school choice makes less sense, because the societal problem is not being addressed. “Look at the bigger picture,” a MD man asserted. “All you are doing is perpetuating the problem. If you allow them to move, that school [they left] then becomes dead.”

Market-Based Accountability

When people are thinking in Market-Based Accountability frame of mind, they are looking at education as a service they are purchasing, a market-based good, and they want proof that consumers are getting what they pay for, i.e., are my tax dollars being spent well? This way of thinking perceives standards as defining the expectations for service and testing as the “proof” that the service was delivered. If the service was not delivered, it is because teachers and principals are not working hard enough to provide the service. If they continue to fail, people expect that the service provider (schools) will be punished for faulty service. Cutting funds, changing school leadership, or choosing a different school become appropriate punishments in this mindset.

School is like a business. When operating in the Market-Based Accountability mindset, people apply the rules of the business world to education. “I think we're running it like a business,” a CT woman expressed. “You do well; you thrive, you succeed. You don't do well, you're out of business.” According to a MD man, “Mayor Bloomberg in New York...appointed the head of the school system who is a former CEO of a major company and he is bringing in all these CEOs to help run the school system because he believes running a school system is like running a business. There is not a profit downside, but all the other decisions and things you have to do are.”

Educators are not working hard enough. In this mindset, if schools are not succeeding, the problem is that educators are not trying, i.e., they have no incentive to perform. In talking about her local school board, a CT woman complained, “I think they are burned out and lazy actually.” “We have a lot of teachers that are just babysitting,” a CT man added. “I've been in schools and I see them sitting in the front and the kids are going hog wild in the classroom.” “You talk about they don't make much money but yet they are talking about the kids going home with three hours of homework,” a TN man explained. “Obviously the teacher is not doing her job because if they were, they wouldn't have to bring as much homework home.”

The system needs more accountability – punish the bad and reward the good. What is missing in the education system, according to focus group participants, is an incentive to perform. Educators are not punished when they do not perform, nor are they rewarded when they do perform. “It's no different from when you get out in real life and you're working a job,” a TN father explained. “If you don't do your job to the best of your ability, you're not going to get a raise.” “I think one of the steps that should be taking place here now is to hold the teachers accountable for the students,” a CT man suggested. “I mean if you are held accountable for teaching this student, seeing to it that the student is learning then he comes away from your class at the end of the year with some additional knowledge. Then I think that in itself will be a weeding out process... I think if they hold them accountable, that will give the system a way of eliminating the bad teachers.”

The existing system does not allow teachers to be held accountable, they perceive. A TN woman insisted that as long as a teacher doesn't "hit a kid or molest a kid, [they're] not going to lose [their] job." "If the kids aren't learning, they cannot fire you," a TN man agreed. "They can give you leave or something like that, but they cannot outright fire you unless you are going in there and not doing nothing."

They believe that unions protect the worst teachers from punishment and prohibit the best teachers from getting rewards. "I've debated the idea of unions with schools," a TN mother expressed. "Is that doing more damage? The teacher doesn't have the opportunity for the raise or the bonus, and a teacher who is really dedicated, which I have observed this past year, why not give her a bonus?"

If the service is flawed, it should be fixed or consumers should be given other choices. Public school choice becomes a logical solution in this mindset. "They are the consumers," a MD man explained. "This is looked at as they're going to give the consumers what they want, assuming the parents know what their kids need. The question is are they going to be able to transfer their child to another public school or public charter school." In fact, in a Market-Based Accountability mindset, giving money to underperforming schools can do more harm than good. "They need the money the worst if they're not performing," a MD father suggested, "but maybe you shouldn't do either because then theoretically you could get paid for underperforming."

It follows, then, that when consumers choose the better product, the "competitors" will be forced to improve their service or go out of business. Note the following conversation among CT residents who do not have children in public schools:

*Each district will have to work very hard to compete.
It's capitalism at it's finest. You have to be the best school you could be to attract the kids because if you are not, they're going to shut down.
I love that idea. That's great.
So now you are going to have all -- they are going to have a quota number one. You are going to have to have say 150 kids can go to this school. That's all you can have.
If the school is that good, it can grow. It can get funded. The bad school should shut down. They don't deserve to be open.*

Even without an economic motivation, focus group participants believe that publishing test scores can cause the leadership of a failing school to buckle down and try harder. "Embarrassment is going to cause someone to change," a TN man stated. "It is going to be an embarrassment and it is going to reflect on them, so when you walk around the town, [it is] as if you were a thief. You're on the news."

Nurturant community

When this frame of mind is active, people see that the community has a stake in the success of schools, and people see standards as an agreement among the community about what schools should achieve. Testing measures, preferably comprehensive measures, are used to diagnose where the problems are occurring in the community. The expectation is that resources will be tailored to fix the unique set of issues that a school or district faces. The problem may exist within the school, or may be associated with problems in the broader community. Providing additional resources, including but not limited to funding, is the result of this mindset. Public school choice is not a good solution in this mindset, because it does not fix the school. A value tied to this mindset is opportunity – are all children being given the best opportunity to succeed? A second value tied to this mindset is the future of the community – children are our future, are we preparing them well?

We all have a stake in quality education. When people are in a Nurturant Community mindset, they see their fate as tied to the fate of public schools in the broader community, not just their own child's school. "These children will be running our country one day," a woman from TN stated. "They will be the CEOs, the presidents, the parents of children." "It's the same way in the fire department," a MD man explained. "You invest in the fire department to protect you. In a sense, when we invest in our children's education, we protect democracy, theoretically." "I think we all benefit from a well-educated population and if it's going to help them to be well-educated, get good jobs, stay in the state, it benefits everybody," a CT woman shared. "The thing is, it sort of does affect you," a MD father stated. "If I take a trip to Florida and they go 'gee, you're from Baltimore City. Gee, you have one of the highest crime rates in the country,' or 'gee, your school system really sucks.' I can say, 'I'm not in Baltimore City. I'm in Baltimore County.' But I want Baltimore City to achieve, so I can be proud. Yes, this is Baltimore; this is great. So yeah, I think we should all have a concern no matter where we live."

When they are thinking of public education as a community responsibility, they see public education as a priority and are motivated to lift all schools in their district or state. "So if there is a state board of education," a CT man asked, "aren't we required to keep all public schools within the state at a certain level?" "Let's go work on it until we find a solution," a TN man insisted. "If this ain't the solution after they enact it, well guess what? Let's resolve it. Let's revise it. Let's do something that works. Let's try something different because you give up on life, well hey guess what? I'm on a cliff. I'm hanging off. The rock I grab isn't working. I should just let go and die. No."

This way of thinking allows people to defend against the Market-Based Accountability frame. Note the following conversation among MD residents who do not have children in public schools. The first participant is explaining the need for accountability in schools by describing how all jobs require accountability. The next two participants reject that thinking by stating that schools are not creating products for sale and profit.

What do you do for a living? You work in interior design. Bottom line if your boss says listen Nancy, we're not making any money. We've got to sell more furniture, you are going to pick up the pace and sell more furniture.

There is only one problem, Mike. This is a production, corporate model and you're not dealing with humans in -- this is a different kind of model.

Because indirectly it is helping me. I'm into a business and eventually these children will come out into the community ... We have responsibilities as being earth people to other earth people.

Similarly, when a TN father suggested that the situation facing education should be treated like any other job, a TN mother rejected the market-based comparison:

It's no different from when you get out in real life and you're working a job. If you don't do your job to the best of your ability, you're not going to get a raise.

Yeah, but this is not a job. This is preparing for life.

In this mindset, tests are not used to punish. Instead, their purpose is to identify problems, to track progress and to determine where to target additional resources. "Testing is not the end all, be all," a CT woman explained. "It's just the identifier." "A diagnosis doesn't cure you," a TN father remarked. "A diagnosis requires some treatment or something to be implemented and I think that would be the appropriate use of testing." "You can begin to theoretically diagnose what it is," a MD man stated. "You can come in and really focus laser like on what's the problem in the school."

In the Nurturant Community mindset, focus group participants want to send additional resources to fix problems. "It's going in there and correcting the problems," a CT man suggested. "Now it does cost to do that, but it would benefit our children and our children's children in the long run to do it that way." "Like have a group of people set just for that so that if a school does come in with a low score that maybe a team of people can go into that school to help with the teachers, to help with the whole scenario to try to figure out exactly what the problem is and what they need to focus on," a TN mother suggested.

Importantly, while the Nurturant Community causes people to want to prioritize and invest in education, it is still critical to recognize that solutions need to be about more than funding. "In order to get the situation under hand they will have to invest more in these troubled areas," a CT man noted. "But I don't mean just throwing money at them." However, this mindset certainly makes a strong case for opposing budget cuts as an accountability measure. "To pull the funds," a TN mother complained, "you are hurting them even more."

Finally, since a Nurturant Community mindset is about improving the community at large, it allows people to see a connection to other community resources for kids. "That's why we need to stop closing down all the recreation centers," a MD mother suggested, "because there was help there for kids if their parents could not read. You had a place to go to get some help." "They are even shutting libraries down," a MD father added. "You have to improve the whole situation," a MD father asserted. "You can't just improve education without improving everything else."

It follows, then, that public school choice makes no sense, because it does nothing to strengthen the community. “You need to improve the entire district,” a TN mother stressed. “And that goes back to if that school, those people would get together and work with the school. There needs to be more community.”

Finally, this mindset allows a conversation about inspirational teaching. Instead of hard-nosed accountability, this is about inspiring children. “When they're interested in learning, they're like sponges,” a CT mother stated, “but when they sit there and blah, blah, blah, monotone, monotone, they just zone out to somewhere else.”

Implementing NCLB

Focus group participants were exposed to a variety of communications about implementing NCLB, including:

- a series of recommendations for improving education, several of which are incorporated in NCLB
- a short description of the Act, and
- a series of messages about specific elements.

This section reports on focus group participants’ reactions to policy recommendations and the elements of NCLB, by tying together common threads across these discussions. Importantly, participants’ reactions to the policies exist within the broader frames of mind outlined in the previous section: Neglectful Parents, Bad Society, Market-Based Accountability, and Nurturant Community. Ties to these mindsets and tensions between them as they relate to each policy are discussed. The objective of this discussion is to understand how best to position each policy element within the Nurturant Community frame, not to select one or two policy elements to advance in a public dialogue. Education advocates are in the best position to determine which policy elements should take priority.

Qualified Teachers and Quality Teaching

Certification

Focus group participants assume that all teachers are required to meet licensing requirements before they become teachers. While a few realize that there may be exceptions to the rule due to teacher shortages, or waivers while a teacher works to meet requirements, focus group participants believe that nearly all teachers are certified. When presented with a recommendation to “require teachers to be certified or licensed in the subject they teach,” their belief that all teachers are already certified is undermined. They are horrified at the prospect of uncertified teachers in the classroom. Note the following conversation among CT parents of public school children:

Moderator: Okay. So this is kind of a non-issue because [teachers are already required to be certified]?

Yeah.

Aren't they?

No.

They're not?

They're not. They're not.

Oh my God.

Yes, they are.

They can't teach without it.

The prospect of uncertified teachers brings to mind participants' worst experiences with poor teaching. "When I was in high school my health teacher was a coach and he came in on test day," a TN woman remembers. "From Monday through Thursday we watched Ren and Stimpy every day. I'm serious. We taught ourselves for the week." The teacher certification component of NCLB can easily trigger the Market-Based Accountability frame of mind, since it places all the responsibility for quality education on teachers, causing people to think of the "good" and "bad" teachers in the system.

Continuing Education

To shift the conversation toward "quality teaching" and away from "qualified teachers," one of the policy recommendations included in the mix was "to develop training programs to help teachers learn approaches that interest and inspire children to learn." This policy recommendation can easily reside in either the Nurturant Community mindset or the Market-based Accountability mindset, depending on the context of the dialogue. Focus group participants want children to be inspired, and believe that a lack of quality teaching is a problem. However, they believe that teachers already receive on-going training.

Focus group participants believe that all children learn differently and that children learn best when they are inspired. "Well, children learn differently and I think you should be aware of how a child learns and be able to translate to get the child to understand and to learn on that level, however they learn," a CT mother expressed. "I think an inspiring teacher can even get through sometimes to the tougher kids," a MD man suggested. "I mean we've seen stories about it all the time in the news and all."

Several suggest that inspirational teaching is missing in many classrooms. "The classes are too big," a CT father explained. "And sometimes they just give up. It's like a losing battle," a CT mother remarked. Another added, "That takes money to have resources to work from, and that's a problem." Some find it difficult to estimate how many teachers are inspirational. "I would say that changes from school to school," a TN mother remarked. "Many of them are getting frustrated," another added. "The people that aren't dedicated and aren't into it," a TN father explained, "it's a frustration level thing." "I do believe the majority of new teachers coming in have ideas and they are good," a CT man remarked, "before they get beat down and they become babysitters."

Focus group participants believe quality teaching comes from within – teachers either have the gift and passion to inspire or they do not. “It’s got to be in the heart,” a TN woman suggested. “They’ve got to want to do it.” “I think teaching is a calling,” a TN father noted. “It’s not something that you just decide you’re going to do or be.” Few see that teachers can be trained to be more inspiring. “You can’t inspire a teacher,” a TN man explained. “The teacher has to be inspired to do it and love what they want to do.” “I don’t think there is anything you can require a teacher to do to make them want to teach better,” a TN woman asserted. “I think like you said it comes from the heart.”

Once training is suggested, they wonder why this is not part of the training that teachers already receive. “I thought that was part of the requirement to maintain your teacher’s certification,” a TN father suggested. They assume teachers learn inspirational teaching techniques during in-service trainings and other venues. “They always leave classes,” a MD mother complained. “Oh school will be closed for this. School will be closed for that. What are they doing?”

In fact, not all understand the high level of education, certification and continuing education that teachers are required to complete. “My job, I have to keep my certifications up and do my courses and tests. Why shouldn’t they?” a CT father asked. “I think teachers should be required to have continuing education,” a TN woman suggested. “I think it shouldn’t just be you have to graduate four years of college. Okay, I’m a teacher now and I can teach for 20 years and never have any kind of continuing education.”

Salaries

In the dialogue about increasing teachers’ salaries, the Market-Based Accountability frame of mind comes into conflict with the Selfless Teacher mindset. People believe that higher salaries draw more capable people to a career. However, they also believe the best teachers are those who care about students and are passionate about teaching. They do not want people to be drawn to teaching just for a paycheck. The following conversation among people in TN who do not have children in the public schools, is an example of this collision of competing frames. The participants want to give good teachers higher salaries or bonuses, yet they do not want teachers motivated by money:

Yeah, but what I disagree with is a teacher who doesn't put the effort forward versus a teacher who does, they make the same amount of money. That's where I disagree. You become a teacher because you are passionate about it, because you love children, that's why you want to be a teacher.

Exactly, but that doesn't occur nowadays. There is a few but then there is a few who are just looking for a paycheck.

I think that's the way it used to be, you wanted to be a teacher because you wanted to teach your kids, your community. Today's society, teaching is a job. It's a profession just like customer service is a profession.

Unions are a violation of the market-based system, because they remove incentive to perform. “I’ve debated the idea of unions with schools,” a TN mother expressed. “Is that doing more damage? The teacher doesn’t have the opportunity for the raise or the bonus, and a teacher who is really dedicated, which I have observed this past year, why not give her a bonus?” “They need to eliminate the tenure system because the tenure system makes it impossible to fire teachers,” a CT woman recommended.

Phrases such as “We need more education money for the recruitment, training and retention of quality teachers,” and “competitive salaries” trigger this market-based thinking. However, the existing alternative mindset of teachers being motivated by more than money, allows people to dismiss higher salaries as irrelevant to the quality of education. Both existing views are problematic.

This specific issue of advancing efforts to increase teachers’ salaries would benefit from further investigation. However, these focus groups provide some direction about avenues of communication that may prove more advantageous. One alternative would be to move the dialogue away from the market-based frame of mind and toward a value/respect mindset. For example, this message could be “we should demonstrate the high priority we place on teachers by paying them well. Right now, many teachers earn less than a garbage collector. What does that say about how much we value teachers?” However, this approach could also further entrench the idea that teachers are in this profession just because they care, not for the money.

Another approach would be to continue to advance teachers’ salaries in the market-based frame, but shift to a competition model, suggesting that this is about attracting the best teachers to a community, not about retaining teachers or recruiting teachers to the profession. As a MD man noted, “I think there is a disparity between the school districts. The higher paid teachers and the benefit packages are going to going to the better school districts. I think that is a serious issue.” This approach could work within a broader Nurturant Community frame, since the context is about improving school district or the state as a whole.

A second approach to advance teachers’ salaries within a market-based frame is to stress the high level of education and continuing education that teachers have to complete. An example of this message would be: “not only are teachers required to have a college degree, but in our state most have a master’s degree and all are required to continue their education in college courses. Teachers are highly skilled professionals, and their salary needs to reflect that skill.” The benefit of this last strategy is that it improves the image of teachers and the education system while it makes the case for higher salaries. Again, these particular recommendations regarding increasing teachers’ salaries would benefit from further study.

Testing and Accountability

The Purpose of Testing

Standardized tests allow people to understand how well schools are performing and what students are learning. “I think you can go ahead thinking that your kid knows all this stuff,” a CT father described, “and then you find out there is no testing and you realize they don't know anything. So I think the only way to know whether they really know anything is something like testing.”

NCLB’s testing and accountability requirements trigger the Market-Based Accountability mindset, and when in that frame of mind, focus group participants see the tests as a way to prove whether or not schools are achieving and who is to blame for any lack of achievement. “That would be the only way to test the teachers, though,” a man from TN asserted. “If they are not getting taught, they don't understand that somebody is at fault, either the kid, the parent, the teacher. Somebody is not trying.”

If they are not achieving, Market-Based Accountability thinking would dictate that schools be punished in some way. “I think if there is accountability,” a CT father noted, “there ought to be some kind of penalty... why say you are going to be accountable for something and then so if I don't meet the standard then nothing happens. Something has to happen.” “If you were the principal,” a TN man imagined, “and okay, ‘we're not up to par. Where are we not up to par? We're not up to par in Jill's group, Wendy's group. Okay, them two are gone. If everybody else is good, they get to stay. Award them another raise. Bring two new teachers in and then attack it again.’” “It's like in the military,” a MD man explained. “If the troops don't perform, then the commander gets shot. He gets booted.” “If a school does good in part of the town,” a CT woman stressed, “then why can't the school in the other part of town do just as good? Why should there be funding and all this other stuff to bring this school up? Why would that be laid upon us as taxpayers to bring the school up? Shouldn't they just be closed or something? The language of accountability locks people into a punishment frame of mind and keeps them from seeing other perspectives. “What's the alternative?” a MD man asked. “If they don't withhold the funds, what's the alternative?”

To begin to determine the power of the opposition’s message strategy, a fictional quote was included in the focus group dialogue that stressed accountability and punishment. While most rejected the harsh tone, the basic point of the quote was persuasive to several. A CT mother reacted, “It's true.” “Kids are graduating because they are 17, 18. You can't have a 21-year-old who can't read still a

We put more and more money into schools and yet our children still can't read. It is time to tell schools to do the job they are supposed to do, or fire the leadership and replace them with people who can get the job done. If a school can't meet basic standards, then it is time to stop wasting our tax dollars on that school, and instead give it to a school that is successful.

The Honorable L.H. Smith, Member of Congress

senior in high school,” added another. “They just keep moving them through the system,” responded a CT mother. “It’s just time to stop wasting time,” insisted a TN man. “Let’s do something about it right now. We’re wasting money. We’re wasting time.” Not surprisingly, a Member of Congress is an ineffective messenger. They are viewed as out-of-touch and more interested in political advantage than in doing what is right.

Testing for accountability can also trigger the Neglectful Parent or Bad Society perspectives. “It could be you have fantastic teachers at this particular school but the students, for some reason, are bad,” a MD man suggested. “So now who gets blamed? Do the teachers get fired? Do they get transferred? They’re not going to fire the students, so what do you do?” This way of thinking allows focus group participants to abdicate responsibility for improving schools in other communities. Note the following conversation among CT residents who do not have children in the public schools:

If you look at the geographic areas of the rankings, you are going to see that they are around Bridgeport, New Haven, Hartford, Waterbury, some of your large urban areas.

Right.

And it comes down to these are the areas where people who are in the lower socio-economic class are going to congregate. They live in the inner city.

And it’s the transient . . .

And then you get your transient population.

At the same time, the high stakes involved in testing with accountability, causes focus group participants to worry about “teaching to the test.” “The whole school district is under pressure for the kids to score well on the test because it keeps real estate values up when they do well,” a CT woman explained. “They’re just trying to gear it where they can make a high score as they compete,” a MD father noted.

People oppose “teaching to the test,” because they think it results in rote memorization, rather than real learning or developing critical thinking skills. “Some teachers teach to the test,” a CT woman remarked. “They don’t teach them to think.” “The purpose of education is to teach children how to think for themselves,” a MD mother stated. “Having an annual standardized test . . .” “They’ll be taught the test,” finished a MD father.

This criticism of high stakes testing can be encouraged with language such as the language tested in the groups: “Too much emphasis on standardized tests stifles creativity and forces teachers to teach to the test when their real job should be to inspire our students to love learning.” In reaction to this statement, one TN father said, “When their job is on the line, they’re getting too into this test. ‘You’ve got to pass this test.’ That’s all they do, test, the test, the test, the test. They’re not -- like this one goes on to say, they’re not inspiring students to learn. They’re not teaching them how to problem solve. They’re just, ‘pass the test. You’ve got to pass the test. You’ve got to know this right here to pass the test.’”

Much of the language tested in the focus groups shifts people toward the Nurturant Community frame, for example:

- “Students’ progress should be measured by their grades, attendance and how much they enjoy school—not just by standardized testing.”
- “Let’s amend the federal law to allow standardized tests to be in their proper place and allow more flexibility in how schools evaluate students.”
- “Underperforming schools really should get help in the form of more funding to allow them to hire more and better qualified teachers to reduce class size and inspire learning.”

Similarly, a fictional quote presented to focus group participants was successful in putting testing in its proper place. “I think we need to identify why the school is struggling and then that’s a starting point,” a CT father explained. “Unless we can identify that, then you know you are just wasting your time.” “That’s just one tool to help identify,” added another.

Tests are one tool to help identify struggling students and struggling schools. But testing alone isn’t a solution. We need to match test results with the programs and funds that can bring struggling schools the help they need to achieve.
Taylor Behr, CEO

There are benefits as well as risks in using a businessperson as a messenger. They are effective if people view them as a member of the community who has a stake in the community’s future. “They are going to be employing the graduates of the school system,” a TN father suggested. However, the risk is that a businessperson will encourage a Market-Based Accountability mindset. “He’s running a business,” a CT woman asserted. “Isn’t running schools a business? Isn’t that a system that needs running?” According to a TN woman, “He thinks dollars and cents.” “The school system is not a business,” replied another.

This language helps people recognize that standardized tests should not be the only measure of a student’s success or knowledge. “If you have a child that is bad at test taking, you’ve got to cater to his needs,” a TN man suggested. “Find a way to test them that works best for the individual student.” “Some people test well and some people don’t,” a CT mother stated. “It doesn’t make them smart or not smart.” “It’s also stressful for the child,” a CT mother asserted. “I know when my fourth grader had the CMT, my son exhibited a lot of anxiety and stress over that because the teachers pushed the test so much.”

Two elements in the statements noted above weaken the points. First, “measured by how much they love school,” sounds unrealistic. “How do you measure how much we enjoy school,” a MD mother asked. Furthermore, some worry that “allowing flexibility” indicates that the standards won’t really mean anything. “Well, as soon as you allow flexibility, there aren’t any more standards,” a MD man insisted.

Instead of punishing schools, when participants are operating in the Nurturant Community frame of mind, they want to provide the assistance schools need to achieve.

This way of thinking was encouraged with statements such as “standardized tests should mainly be used to identify and target tutoring and other remedial help for struggling students—to help them succeed.” “If you find that they're doing poorly in a subject, you give them the resources to improve,” a MD man suggested. “If their school is not doing well, they have to have the resources to bring in these specialists to correct the problem.” “That's why we do tests and surveys to find out what is wrong so we can improve it, not so we can punish,” another added. “I think you need to find a way if this one district is lower than everybody else around it, you need to find out what's wrong in that one district and try to do something about it,” a TN father stated.

One of the fictional quotes tested in the groups was effective in shifting focus group participants from punitive measures toward measures to assist schools. Characterizing cutting funds to a school as “not making sense” is powerful language in line with how focus group participants see

We wouldn't call a child a failure if they didn't do well on a test, so we shouldn't label schools failures. The No Child Left Behind Act labels struggling schools as failing, and then takes funds away from those schools. That just doesn't make sense. Instead of labels and withholding funds for struggling schools, we need to provide the assistance that will help all schools achieve.

Chris Regan, Parent

this punitive measure. “Taking away the funds,” a CT man explained, “that is a problem because if they are already struggling and they're not doing the job and you take away the funds, they can only do worse.” Criticizing the label, however, does nothing to advance the conversation. “I don't see a problem with bringing out the fact that they are failing,” a CT man asserted. Another added, “Because you need to know so that you know why you're putting these funds into the school.” Finally, a parent is an effective messenger in limited situations. The danger of a parent as a messenger is that it brings further energy to the Neglectful Parent frame. In certain cases, however, when the parents are already assumed to be uninvolved, an organized group of parents working for improvements could be an effective strategy.

Similarly, one of the fictional quotes tested in the groups proved to be an effective example for how to critique the accountability testing within a Nurturant Community frame. This quote caused focus group participants to remember what is working and what sets American schools apart from the rest of the world. “Just the creativity of Americans,” a CT father explained. “I mean the Europeans and things that I’ve spoken with yes, the Japanese are very good studying the books and taking the tests. And the Germans crank out their engineers...but Americans are known for creative thinking. We should be encouraging that.” “I like the ‘drill and kill,’” a MD father noted. “Kill your spirit, your will to be creative.” “Inspiring imagination and critical thinking,” a TN mother read. “It’s very true and not doing the drill and kill test approach because like in Japan, they pound that stuff into them kids...I want them to have a creative mind also as well as the knowledge.”

What the rest of the world admires about American schools is our ability to inspire imagination and critical thinking – skills that are hard to measure on typical standardized tests. In striving to make schools accountable, we don’t want to destroy what is best in our schools by creating a high-stress drill and kill testing approach to education. Instead, we should promote quality teaching by training teachers in methods to inspire students and we should look at a variety of measures, not just one test, to determine success.

Dale Wilson, Middle School Teacher

Teachers are very effective spokespeople for this critique of high-stakes accountability testing. “Maybe we should have more opinions from teachers,” a TN mother suggested. “I mean the good teachers. I don’t how you quantify that, but they are the ones that are in there. They are the ones that are, if they are dedicated they want the children to learn and know best how to instruct the student.” A TN man asserted, “This is a teacher talking about teachers.” “He’s in the trenches,” added another. “It comes from the heart,” stated a TN woman.

Additional Education Services

People do not believe there is any one fix for schools, so they are more comfortable with the broad stroke language of tailoring assistance to the schools’ needs, than they are with NCLB’s specific recommendations for tutoring, after-school, or summer school services.

When people are in the Market-Based Accountability frame, and they are convinced that schools are not trying hard enough, they wonder why students are not learning during the regular school day. “It is one of those cases once again, you are throwing money at a problem,” a TN mother complained. “I think those services should be incorporated into the every day learning process anyway.” “To me it seems wrong,” stated a CT man. “I mean kids should be able to learn in school and he shouldn’t have to have a regular tutor.”

In this particular instance, however, when people are thinking of individual children who may be lacking a particular skill, they support these interventions. “I see it as we’re bringing

every kid to the same level,” a CT man remarked. “Well, some kids are going to need a tutor. I don't see anything wrong with that.”

The specific language of NCLB is problematic, because the tutoring and summer school requirements are activated when the school is underperforming. In the public's mind, tutoring and summer school should not be school-wide solutions, they should be used to assist individual children in need of additional help. If tutoring and summer school are presented as solutions for a failing school, rather than assistance for an individual student, it is likely to further undermine support for the school.

Public School Choice

As suggested earlier in this analysis, public school choice seems like an appropriate alternative when people are operating in the Market-Based Accountability mindset. However, when people are operating in the Nurturant Community frame of mind, public school choice makes no sense.

According to a Market-Based Accountability mindset, if the service is flawed, it should be fixed or consumers should be given other choices. Public school choice becomes a logical solution. “They are the consumers,” a MD man explained. “This is looked at as they're going to give the consumers what they want, assuming the parents know what their kids need. The question is, are they going to be able to transfer their child to another public school or public charter school?”

One of the tested statements opposing school choice was successful in creating opposition to school choice, however, it still operates in the Market-Based Accountability frame, and so it triggers other punitive measures. The following statement would be more effective if it did not include a reference to new leadership (which advances support for a punitive measure) or to parents (which triggers the Neglectful Parent frame): “Failing schools need new leadership to work with teachers and parents to improve their performance, not to have their students taken away.”

Since a Nurturant Community mindset is about improving the community at large, public school choice makes no sense, because it does nothing to strengthen the community. “You need to improve the entire district,” a TN mother stressed. “And that goes back to if that school, those people would get together and work with the school. There needs to be more community.”

Two messages tested in the groups successfully advanced this mindset: “Simply transferring students out of a failing school doesn't improve the school. Let's improve the federal law to make it work for all our students and the communities they live in” and “We aren't fixing anything by transferring students from one place to another. We need to improve the entire district.”

Once a person is operating in this mindset, they are resistant to arguments in support of public school choice. In reaction to a fictional quote by an advocacy organization in support of public school choice, focus group participants stressed the importance of not abandoning a public school.

No child should have to risk their future by attending a failing school. It is time we gave parents the choice to send their child to a school of their choosing. We can't lose the current generation while public schools try to fix what is broken.

Jamie Stone, Advocacy Organization

“The problem is still there,” argued a TN father. “You just moved it to a different place.” “I don't think the answer is a change in schools,” suggested a TN man. “The answer is fixing that school, not changing schools.”

Similarly, the messages regarding vouchers create a clash between Market-Based Accountability thinking and Nurturant Community thinking. If education is a purchased service, then it is not fair that some pay for a service they are not using. “People who pay for their kids to go to private school, why do their tax dollars go towards the public schools?” a TN man asked. “Then we tried to figure out how could that person get those tax dollars back since he is not using the public schools.” However, if education is a shared objective of the community, it makes sense for all citizens to support it. “It's the same way in the fire department,” a MD man explained. “You invest in the fire department to protect you. In a sense, when we invest in our children's education, we protect democracy, theoretically.”

Standards and Achievement

Focus group participants cannot conceptualize standards that would be *too* high. In their view, standards are goals to achieve. “What's wrong with setting the standards high?” a TN father asked. “High set of standards, only 20 percent are making it,” a TN father imagined, “We're shooting at a higher mark. There is nothing wrong with having high standards. It doesn't always mean you're going to make the mark. I mean that's one of the things we've done. I think we've dumbed it down. We've shot our standards so low that we're not shooting high enough.”

If their school did not meet the standards set by the state, most would not question the standards. Instead, they would question their school's quality. “Because there is definitely a problem somewhere,” a TN father worried. “You need to raise the curriculum. You need to do something.” “I wouldn't drop the standard,” stated a TN mother. “I'd bring the curriculum up.”

Funding and Standards

As noted earlier in this report, people do not necessarily tie school quality to funding. One of the messages tested in the groups attempted to make this tie more explicit. It was not effective. People believe that the problems facing education require more than money. In reacting to this

Of course we should hold all schools up to the same high standards, but that means we also have to make sure that all schools have the same funding. It is not fair to tell low-income schools to meet the same standards as high-income schools unless we are willing to provide the same resources for student achievement.

Pat Owens, State Legislator

fictional quote, one TN father complained, “I think that isolates the monetary side of it without the [parental] involvement. Again, there is more to it than just the money...there are a lot of schools that perform at a very high level at a lower funding rate than other schools, so funding is not the only issue. But that seems to be the one that gets all the focus.” “It oversimplified the problem,” remarked a CT father. “Just throw money at it and if you make the money equal, the problem goes away.” Some who believe that money is an issue rejected the apples-to-apples comparison. “Certain students going in a certain direction are going to need more money than certain students going in another direction,” a CT father explained. “It doesn't mean that one is better than the other one. It just means you need to give them what they need.”

Focus group participants question whether there is a correlation between funding and achievement. “I don't know if there is a direct correlation all the time between amount spent per pupil and the achievement level,” asserted a MD man. “I think if you look at many communities where they are spending \$500 per student they may be getting results and we're spending \$1900 per student.” A reminder of the tangible ways money is spent helps in this regard. “It's not fair to tell the low income to meet the same standards as high [income] unless we are willing to provide the same resources and resources are funds. Computers is money; books is money,” a TN mother argued.

Part of the problem, is that some do not understand the disparities in education funding. “I was under the impression all schools got the same funding. Do they not?” a TN man asked. “But I don't know how that's divided,” a MD father stated. “Is that state money?” While most understand that wealthier areas pay more taxes for school funding, some believe that higher-income areas have more resources for their schools for other reasons, such as the PTAs raise more money in wealthier areas. “Some of it comes from private sources,” a MD father explained. “Like there are PTA's in certain schools that raise money for computers. Giant Food used to contribute Apple computers with receipts and so forth.” “We raise a ton of money,” explained a MD father. “The PTA raises about \$25,000 a year that we're able to buy gym equipment with, computers, software, teacher's supplies, books that the county doesn't provide or the teacher buys out of their pocket.”

The Achievement Gap

Focus group participants are not convinced that all children can achieve at high levels. They point to students with obvious deficiencies as one example. “Because if you can't speak English,” a CT woman explained, “you have to take a test, you're not going to be graded the same way. If you're blind, you are not going to be graded the same way if you have to read Braille.” “If you have a learning disability,” noted a CT mother, “you can't learn at that level. I mean they are using the word here, ‘same levels.’ That's not going to happen. Some children pick things up extremely quickly. Others may take a little bit more time, where others may just never get it. So when they talk about anything where they are going to say it's the same, it's not. With each child it is very different.”

Even once beyond extreme examples, several note that some people are just not meant for high educational achievement. “I just don't believe that we're going to educate 100 percent of the kids and I'm willing to drop 6 or 8 percent and say they're going to have to go to vocational schools and that's it,” stated a MD man. “If we have to teach them how to be hairdressers or mechanics or a dentist or whatever you want, that's how we teach them. In other words, they don't have to learn English and math and algebra and history.” “Some kids are never going to want to learn algebra and why should you consistently mark them as the bottom of the barrel when it's never going to happen for whatever reason,” a CT father asserted. “We live in a society that requires brain surgeons, rocket scientists, garbage collectors, auto repairmen, janitors and we achieve at all levels and we have occupations for all those for people to work in and be productive,” a TN father stated. “So saying everybody has got to work at the highest level and achieve at the highest level... If everybody is a brain surgeon, who is going to be a janitor?”

Focus group participants firmly believe that the same standards should be set for all schools, regardless of economic or demographic profiles. They are offended by NCLB's requirement to categorize test results by ethnic or economic categories. Most do not understand why race or economics should matter. “What does economically disadvantaged have to do with the public school?” a TN man asked. “They're getting their education through their parents' tax money, through other peoples' tax money. It should have no effect. They go to school. As long as they are clothed. They can get their free food or however that works through the state of Tennessee... The kid will have lunch. He has his schooling. He can get pencils from his teacher and do his work. Economically it shouldn't have any effect on whether a child learns or doesn't learn.” “What does it matter what race they are?” a CT father asked. “It doesn't matter.” “Kids are kids,” stated a TN woman. “We all have a brain... one kid isn't going to test better because they are black or white.” “They walk in the classroom,” a CT man insisted. “They shut their mouths. They sit down and they learn. It doesn't matter what color you are.”

Since they already believe that ethnicity should not matter, focus group participants find compelling the statement, “The results of standardized test should not broken out to focus on various race or income sub-groups—they need to focus on all students to insure that schools are making progress for all.” However, even entering this dialogue distracts from the larger point that certain districts are not achieving, and masks the reasons for lack of

achievement. This dialogue causes people to focus on individuals rather than disparities in resources among school districts. “That's why we're saying the color doesn't matter because there could be a white person living in a black, poor neighborhood and there is a black man living in a white neighborhood,” a CT mother argued. “It has nothing to do with color any more.” “It doesn't make any sense,” a CT father asserted, “because the classroom could be filled with half one and half the other and the teacher is the same and she is giving the same lesson.”

Furthermore, they believe categorizing by ethnicity and income sets low expectations. “This almost creates an expectation that those kids are not going to do as well,” stated a MD mother. “I think it's demoralizing to some extent,” suggested a MD man. “If I were in that school as a student and I saw that I was part of a group that is underperforming, that's got to be some kind of stigma as far as I was concerned.”

Importantly, many assume that the reason for categorizing test scores is to give minorities an advantage. “I don't think they should get a handicap,” a CT woman stated. “I think if the grades are down, pull them up. Pull them up. It doesn't matter who you are.” “They've seen in the past that these children aren't scoring as well, so they want to give them a break,” remarked a TN man. “Well there should be no break.” Another added, “[They are] trying to come up with some numbers why they need to give more money to the minority groups.” “Are you saying that a racial or ethnic minority group is less capable or are you saying they are more capable?” a TN mother asked. “A good score for them, is that different than a good score for another group? Do you know what I'm saying? I mean what's the standard for what is acceptable? What level of achievement is acceptable? Well, this group has to achieve this level, but this group doesn't really have to achieve that level.”

They reject that standardized tests could be biased against certain groups. Therefore, they reject the argument that “Some standardized tests could be biased against the poor, minorities, or students who are not proficient in English and this isn't fair.” “No, because they should pass them,” asserted a TN mother. Because people have difficulty seeing cultural differences, this message quickly devolves into a dialogue about slang and accepted English. If, and when, advocates need to talk about bias in testing, it would be better to use gender-based examples, rather than cultural ones.

The challenge in communicating the disparities message is that views about race and class can quickly turn the dominant mindset toward the Neglectful Parent or Bad Society frames of mind. Most assume that inner city schools will not meet standards. “I think those that are going to fail are going to be your inner city schools,” stated a TN father. Various explanations for not meeting standards result from various mindsets. A TN mother in a Bad Society/Neglectful Parent frame of mind stated, “When you are going to the schools that are in the bad areas, those children, don't get me wrong there are children there who can succeed. But for the most part the poor children, their parents don't care and they don't care.” This person is not likely to support increased funding for low-income districts when in this mindset. Contrast her response with a TN mother who can point to funding as a source of the problem: “You go into the inner city schools, they don't have the two or

three computers per classroom and the teachers aides. I would say probably the teachers there are completely worn down. They've probably been there for years.”

For the most part, the following messages, particularly the first, were successful in shifting people toward a frame of mind that would support increased funding and attention to poor-performing districts:

- All students should have the same access to the opportunities that education provides students in well-funded districts.
- Americans believe in equal opportunity. But too many students in low-income areas are shut out of opportunities because their schools don't have the teachers and teaching tools they need to succeed.

In response to these messages, one MD father stated, “I think it is basically saying that whether you have a lot of money or you have very little money, you should have the same resources to achieve at whatever level you need to achieve. But because you have more resources, your school system shouldn't be any better because you happen to be unfortunate and don't have the resources that you should ... Conditions across the board should be very similar. There shouldn't be a variance between what the rich have and what the poor have.”

Discussing an achievement gap, particularly a gap between racial groups, is much more likely to trigger a Neglectful Parent or Bad Society frame. Note the following conversation among Maryland parents of public school children. Once race is introduced, the conversation quickly shifts to a Neglectful Parent discussion:

Moderator: The last bullet where it says, it is important to close the gap, what are they referring to? What gap?

Between the have's and the have not's.

The high achieving schools. . .

And the lower schools.

Yeah. That's the way I look at it.

The educational gap itself.

Moderator: I think what they are referring to is a racial gap and an income gap. In many states the standardized tests show a gap between wealthy schools and lower income schools achieving at different levels; a gap between white students and black students achieving at different levels. And one goal of this Act is to get rid of the gap, to bring everybody up; to focus resources in such a way that everybody is brought up to the same standards.

But that's true not just in education. That's true in all areas of our life we are supposed to close that gap.

I had sort of a question. Let's suppose we let everybody believed to be the best teachers, grades 1 through 6, and the best principals and we put them in the school that is underachieving, primarily because it is poor, minorities coming from broken families and broken homes. Do we think they're going to get better results?

Moderator: What do you think?

I think if the family situation remains the same it would be very difficult even for these outstanding teachers. They may do a little better, but you haven't gotten to the root cause. The root cause to me is not the schools. The root cause is the home.

Similarly, the following conversation among TN residents who do not have children in the public schools quickly triggers a Welfare Society perspective:

It sounded like in the first part of it that they were wanting to give more money to the lower income schools.

Moderator: How do you feel about that?

I was under the impression that busing was supposed to stop all of that.

Yes.

They put the students with all the good teachers, they took neighborhood schools away and they bus you across the world and saying you are getting a better education. Now they are telling us that it's not working.

Schools in low-income areas. Key word there, low income areas. Well, why don't they get the areas of that community involved to help with their schools, to lift their schools and their communities up to standards?

Because they make less money and they pay less taxes than the higher income neighborhoods.

Yeah, but no matter what, the parents need to be involved, period.

But you can't legislate parenting, so you are going to have to do something at the school level as much as you can.

Your tax dollars do go to raise these communities up but you've got people in the communities who don't appreciate what they have, who don't hesitate to bust windows out of houses and stuff like that. They don't care because everything has been given to them and if everything that you have is given to you, you do not appreciate. If you have to work for it and buy it with your own money, you are going to appreciate it and you are going to take care of it.

In addition, describing the funding goal as creating the same access to the opportunities provided to students in well-funded districts, helps to remind people of what the resources are used for. The statement “They need money to fix up crumbling buildings and buy needed equipment and books” helps build support for increased funding for low-income districts. “I think that they should put the money into the districts that are in need,” stated a CT mother. “I mean not, not give to the other ones but it's obvious that there are a lot of crumbling schools, old schools. Who knows if there is asbestos under those tiles?” “Those buildings are just ridiculous, especially in Nashville,” a TN mother complained. “I grew up in Nashville and went to Nashville schools. Some of these Nashville schools, these buildings ought to be condemned. Children need a good environment to grow in.”

Lessons for Communications

Focus communications on being proactive, not defensive. Talk about the right ways to implement reform. Instead of spending energy educating people about NCLB or critiquing the broad principles of NCLB (to test or not to test, to hold accountable or not, to have qualified teachers or not) advocates should put their energies toward sculpting public expectations for implementing NCLB: how tests should be used to target additional resources to where they are needed, how qualified teachers will be attracted to the district, etc. In this way, advocates can re-define NCLB and advance beneficial reforms.

Eliminate the language of Market-Based Accountability. The language of Market-Based Accountability should be avoided because it places blame on educators who are perceived as not working hard enough and it causes people to support punitive measures against underperforming schools. Instead, advocates need to position testing measures as ways to diagnose problems that need to be fixed. Cutting funds to schools, then, makes no sense, because one cannot fix a problem by undermining its resources. Even the word “accountability” in the NCLB language conjures up an image of punishment and should be avoided by advocates. “I mean ‘held accountable’” a TN father explained, “when you say it like that it sounds like you're getting the school in trouble.”

Develop the Nurturant Community Perspective. To effectively advance advocates’ goals, communications needs to strengthen the Nurturant Community frame. To do that, communications needs to include the following elements:

1. ***The context is the broader community, not the individual and not an ethnic group.*** The image of reform needs to be about making sure that all students across a state or region are getting a quality education. Responsibility for quality education needs to be placed with the community – legislators and citizens-at-large – and not just lie with principals, teachers, students and parents. In this way, citizens will see why they should be concerned about struggling districts – it is not about *them*, it is about *us*. Advocates should not emphasize racial disparities; instead, they should discuss disparities between districts and link those disparities to causes and solutions. The emphasis on a broader community will undermine punishments such as cutting funds, and will cause people to see solutions like public school choice as irrelevant.
2. ***This is about opportunity for all children and a better future for us all.*** People value education and do not need to be convinced that it is a priority. One of the motivating values linked to education is opportunity. The public wants to provide opportunity for all children, particularly when the focus of their attention is a broader community, not just their neighborhood school. Furthermore, a dialogue about children causes people to think about whether or not we are doing what is necessary to create a better future. Importantly, an overt dialogue about specific ethnic or economic groups causes people to individualize the problem and blame

parents and society. They become divorced from their own responsibility, because it is positioned as *their* problem, not *our* problem.

3. ***Highlight solutions – we know how to educate and we know what needs to be done.*** Years of communications about failing schools have convinced people that the system is so broken and that the problems are overwhelming, that nobody knows what needs to be done. Specific solutions, what is working and what needs to be done, need to be a central component of this dialogue. Furthermore, solutions cannot just be about funding. Too often advocates stress funding as the solution and do not explain why funding is necessary or how it will be used. The public is not opposed to increasing funding, but they need to know the purpose. For example, the following statement is an example of how to discuss funding effectively: “schools in x district in the state have the largest classrooms, which is one of the reasons why that district does not perform as well as other districts in the state. Funding is needed to hire x number of teachers which will result in smaller classrooms.” Without a rationale, people assume the money is being wasted by an inefficient and ineffective system.
4. ***Diagnostic measures, not testing for accountability.*** Educators need to develop and advocate for measures of success beyond just standardized tests. The public believes that there are many indicators of a good school, including children who love to learn. When standardized tests are used, they need to be positioned as measures to indicate whether or not the community is meeting its standards for education. Currently, NCLB positions tests as the cure, i.e., publish test scores and schools will be shamed into improving. Instead, measures should be used to diagnose where problems exist and to provide additional support to develop a cure for those problems. Publicizing a broader definition of measures will be challenging since the media likes to communicate a “score” that ranks schools. This is problematic, because ranking means there will always be schools at the bottom of the list. Advocates should seek to develop measures that will allow people to see real achievement and not pit one district or school against another.
5. ***Remind people of what is working, so the best of education in America is not destroyed.*** To defend against the Market-Based Accountability mindset, people need to be reminded of what American schools do well – imagination and critical thinking. We do not want to destroy what is best about education in America with drill and kill tests and rote memorization.
6. ***Bring teachers into the discussion.*** When it comes to defining quality education, teachers are very effective messengers and should be encouraged. They are viewed as selfless and dedicated to their students’ best interests. Legislators and political advocates, however, are not effective since their motivations are suspect. Businesspeople and parents can be effective in certain situations.

Areas for Further Investigation Beyond NCLB

Building Long-term Support for Education: Traditionally, advocates assume that if a social problem is characterized in the worst possible light, the public will rise up and insist on addressing the issue. In fact, studies frequently demonstrate that people may become so discouraged by failure that support for additional resources is undermined. The question is, is the image of public education becoming so poor that support for continued funding is being slowly eroded? For the long-term, education advocates need to understand the impact of years of criticism, and determine a communications strategy to restore public education's image.

Advocating for Increased Teacher Salaries: The current argument to increase teachers' salaries relies upon a market-based frame – to attract the most qualified teachers to the profession, salaries need to be higher. This is an effective message for many people; however, it is undermined by the image of a dedicated teacher who is passionate about teaching. Focus group participants want people to come to the profession because they care deeply about children, not because they want a paycheck. One alternative is to move the dialogue away from the market-based frame and toward a value/respect frame. For example, this message could be “we should demonstrate the high priority we place on teachers by paying them well. Right now, many teachers earn less than a garbage collector. What does that say about how much we value teachers?” Another approach would be to continue to advance teacher salaries in the market-based frame, but shift to a competition model: “to attract the best teachers to our state, we need to increase salaries.” A second approach to advance teacher salaries within a market-based frame is to stress the high level of education and continuing education that teachers have to complete. For example: “not only are teachers required to have a college degree, but in our state most have a master's degree and all are required to continue their education in college courses. Teachers are highly skilled professionals, and their salary needs to reflect that skill.” The benefit of this last strategy, is that it improves the image of teachers and the education system while it makes the case for higher salaries.