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Answer Sheet

The strategic campaign needed to save public education – in nine steps

By **Valerie Strauss** August 20 at 4:00 AM

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Leaders of the school standardized test-based reform’ movement have been very smart about using public relations and intentional messaging to their benefit, something their critics have failed to do. Arthur H. Camins, director of the Center for Innovation in Engineering and Science Education at the Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, N.J., discusses where supporters of equitable, democratic and respectful education need to go — and how to get there. The ideas expressed in this article are his alone and do not represent Stevens Institute. His other writing can be

found at www.arthurcamins.com.

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By Arthur Camins

Over the last several decades, a concerted negative public relations effort has tainted the idea of government as a mechanism to serve the common good. Investment in and the credibility of the institution of democratically governed public schools have been under sustained attack, while education inequity has increased. As a result, much needed sustained systemic improvement has been thwarted. The launch of [Democrats for Public Education](#) on August 19 is an encouraging counter-development. However, they will not be successful without an independent strategic, values-driven, public communications campaign to support the struggle for respectful, equitable, democratic education. Without a public movement even the most courageous politicians cannot make a difference.

Intentional messaging comes naturally to the private sector. For example, American Express has a memorable tag line in one of its [commercial spots](#): *This is what membership is. This is what membership does.* Thirty seconds of images and voice-over capture a compelling value – personal security, a clear need – thwarting Internet and credit card fraud, followed by an easily understood solution, and then the clever tag line.

Through use of values resonant imagery and language current education reformers have successfully framed the debate about education improvement and persuaded the public to permit, if not agree with, its favored policies: improvement through market competition and high-

stakes testing. However, messaging need not connote the apparent disingenuousness of persuading people to purchase or agree to something they may not need or want. As George Lakoff argued persuasively in *Don't Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate*, whoever controls language usage also control the parameters of the solutions that get considered. Value-framing language matters.

For example, instead of the short-term, test-score success imagery of the Obama administration's Race to the Top school funding competition, we need the long-term success imagery of *preparation for future learning*. Instead of the individual teacher-blaming imagery of *accountability*, we need the mutual-responsibility imagery of *working together for success for all*. Instead of the competitive, individual success imagery of *choice*, we need the mutual success imagery of *community*.

A successful campaign for respectful, equitable, democratic education starts with values and is followed by solutions.

Start With Values

Gaining support depends upon intentional framing. The starting point is expressing core values that have resonance with the public. Three values statements frame a positive public education agenda:

Children deserve respect: We need an education system that ensures that all students are known, valued and respected by adults and peers.

Children deserve equity: We need an education system

that ensures that *all* students develop their talents and expertise to be successful in work, life and citizenship.

Children deserve democracy: We need an education system that is governed by democracy and engages students so they learn how to participate in a democracy.

This is what education is. This is what education does.

These are not new values to discussion about education, but to be clear the United States has only tinkered with them. They have never fully driven what is regularly done. We need to resist assaults on these values, but [that is not enough](#). To gain public support we need imagery-rich, compelling presentations that connect to specific solutions.

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Follow With Solutions

The values of respect, equity and democracy give morally compelling direction to what we must do and what we must stop doing. This includes:

1) **Teach for future learning:** It is certain that our children will function as adults in a world substantially

different from the one in which they were born. Therefore, while knowing what is now known is vital, learning how to learn must be the primary goal. Therefore, we must abandon test performance as a teaching goal and instead embrace learning from error and iterative improvement. Let's also move away from teaching to get correct answers and toward answering personally and socially meaningful

and toward answering personally and socially meaningful questions. Example: In our [WaterBotics](#) middle- and high school-aged engineering curriculum, students design and build underwater robots that simulate rescuing a drowning swimmer and cleaning up an oil spill. While doing so, students learn how science concepts such as force and motion inform engineering design.

2) **Teach for living together:** Human decency, increasing diversity in the United States and globalization all demand that students develop the knowledge, attitudes and values to interact successfully, live and work across difference. Example: In [The Choices Program](#), while students learn about human agency in resolving historical and current political conflicts, they also wrestle with real ethical and moral choices and engage in discussion with those who see things differently. Not only do students need to learn *about* living together, they also need to *practice* living together. Therefore, we need to stop policies that exacerbate ethnic, racial and socio-economic isolation and instead promote school, housing and workplace integration.

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3) **Teach for engagement:** Students only learn when they are cognitively and emotionally engaged. We do not know what will capture the attention and fascination of each child. Therefore, we need to teach to ignite the varied passions of learners. We need to back away from the exclusive focus on reading and mathematics assessment success and instead engage students in a broad curriculum that includes science and engineering, social science and the arts. In addition, we need to establish classrooms that support not just academic learning but also social and

emotional learning. Example: In the [Responsive Classroom](#) curriculum students learn how to resolve personal conflicts productively, so that classroom culture supports their learning.

4) **Teach for confidence:** Let's abandon the outdated fixed mindset that genes and family circumstance determine intelligence. Let's abandon the all too transparent mechanisms that sort children by perceived ability. These ideas undermine effort and persistence, which are the real drivers of new learning and expertise development. Let's finally fully support students with special needs and English language learners, rather than imagining they can reach their potential through assessment demands. Our capacities and inclinations are the result of complex interactions between genetics and environmental conditions. Let's embrace growing up healthy and create supportive learning environments. Let's build students' confidence by teaching for a growth mindset. Example: In the [Brainology](#) curriculum students learn that intentional effort to "growing their brain" can help them get smarter and develop expertise.

5) **Ensure readiness to learn:** The conditions of children's lives outside of school – in their homes and their communities – have profound impact on their ability to learn in classrooms. We can make those conditions better, but as a society, we have not made this a priority. That is an unconscionable choice that undermines learning and children's success. We need to start by providing "wrap around" economic, social, and emotional support services for children and their families. Other countries do it. We can too.

6) **Ensure equitable funding:** We need to ensure that the resources for effective education are equitably distributed and not a function of local or parent wealth. We need to stop funding education through local property taxes. With some recognition of geographic variance in school operating costs, equity must be guaranteed at the state and national level.

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7) **Ensure Democracy:** School boards, like other elected bodies, do not always make well-informed decisions in the best interest of every child. Sometimes conflicts interfere with efficiency. However, the antidote to flawed democracy is better democracy, not rule by self-appointed experts or authoritarianism. A positive step to ensure democracy is to eliminate the growing influence of money in election campaigns.

8) **Grow teaching expertise:** Teaching is at least as complex as other professions, encompassing disciplinary knowledge and knowledge of learning disciplines, understanding of the developmental, psychological and social dimensions of learning, and norms and of profession interaction, conduct and growth. We need to stop promoting quick, cheap alternative teacher training models. We need to stop promoting technology as an alternative to hiring sufficient numbers of talented teachers and paying them attractive salaries. For example, the [Teaching Works](#) program emphasizes that teachers are not born. They are taught and gain expertise over time. We need to start investing more in programs that emphasize in-place training, apprenticeship and mentorship. Like other countries, we need to build collaborative learning time into teachers' workday to

collaborative learning time into teachers' workday to promote continuous professional growth.

9) **Balance direction and autonomy:** People learn and gain expertise when they get a little direction and guidance about what to learn and how to improve, but also autonomy. In education, no direction results in chaos and lack of social cohesion. Lack of professional autonomy through fear and over-prescription of either content or methods is stultifying and breeds subservience and resistance. We need balance.

This is what education is. This is what education does.

Valerie Strauss covers education and runs The Answer Sheet blog.
