

The Language of SchoolChoice

The Nine Communication Commandments

1. Acknowledge what the public really thinks.

In short: most Americans do favor school choice, but they are less supportive of specific policies. They believe the current system is flawed, but they have little hope it can be changed. And when it comes to the specifics of choice – how vouchers, tax credits, and charter schools actually work – most Americans either have serious misperceptions or simply admit they're uninformed.

2. What Americans really want: effective, motivating, challenging schools and teachers.

The best language is inspirational and focuses on the impact on children, not the education establishment. This is not "education reform." This is about our kids.

3. Personalize, individualize – and above all, humanize.

Without a feeling of intimacy, Americans won't get involved. This needs to be about them, their hometowns, their future and, of course, their children. This is NOT about numbers or statistics or dire predictions from wonky experts.

4. Focus on the results – not on the process.

It's not about "the education system," it's about ensuring every child receives an excellent education. It's not about "teaching" students, it's what students "learn." Accountability matters more than almost anything else.

5. Promote equal opportunity regardless of geography.

A quality education is a right for every child and every family, in every community and every state. Children in Mississippi should have the same opportunity as children in Massachusetts. Plain and simple. If this is just about inner city schools, only inner city residents will care.

6. Don't focus on the negative – but it must be part of your message.

While positive imagery and arguments are comforting and popular, it's the negative ideas and fear of failure that move people to action. Your efforts and outreach must deftly combine both the carrot and the stick in order to succeed. One without the other is not nearly as effective.

7. Part of being a great country is having great schools.

America's strength is cultivated in its schools. Play the America card – often. Embrace "American exceptionalism" and encourage people to embrace the principle of exceptionalism in schools.

8. Part of being a good parent is to demand good schools.

An increasing number of people blame the parents, not the teachers, for the deterioration of education in America. So go with it. Call on parents to do more and to do it now, to ensure that their children and all children are getting the education they deserve.

9. Students themselves are the most effective spokespeople.

Parents are a close second. The general public wants to hear from those whose futures are at stake and the loved ones who care about them most – not from policy experts, talking heads, or even teachers.

Instead of saying this:

Say this:

The education system

America's schools OR Our neighborhood schools

Kids

Students

A national issue OR A local issue OR
A state issue

An American issue that affects us all

It's about what students are TAUGHT

It's what students LEARN

Outcome-based OR A 21st Century approach
OR Focused on the future

We need to get back to the basics

A quality education is an American Privilege

A quality education is an American Right

It's about students' academic performance OR
It's about students' intellectual development

**It's about the knowledge and skills that students
acquire**

It's about the ability to know right from wrong

It's about the ability to think and solve problems

A quality education in America prepares students
for college or a well-paying job or career

A quality education prepares students for LIFE

Reform OR Transformation

Accountability

Our nation's children are not getting the education
they need to compete and win in the 21st Century
global economy.

OR

If we fail to fix our public schools, we could doom
an entire generation of children to low-paying
dead-end jobs.

**We are all responsible for our public schools,
regardless of whether we have children in the
school system**

Alternatives

Options OR Choices

Autonomy OR Independence

Flexibility

School Vouchers

Opportunity Scholarships

The "right" way

Common Sense

Competition, Experimentation

Innovation

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Quick Facts: What Americans Think Today.

Americans know public education is failing.

When asked to assign a letter grade to the overall quality of public education in the U.S., 63% responded C or lower. Only 5% gave public education an A. **You don't need to convince people there's a problem. You need to convince them choice is the solution.**

People don't know – or won't admit – there is a problem with their own schools.

57% of Americans grade their own schools B or higher, and they are more than three times more likely to give public schools in their own neighborhoods and communities an A than public schools overall. Conversely, while almost two-thirds (63%) give US public schools a C or lower, only 34% rank their own local schools this low. **School choice has to be about all students, not just the disadvantaged. You must show people that failure and inefficiency exist throughout the public school system – not just in the inner cities.**

Not only do Americans believe American schools are failing overall – they believe schools are failing to deliver what matters most.

The study asked respondents to rate the effectiveness of public schools in delivering what they themselves said mattered most earlier in the poll (attributes such as "effective," "motivating," and "challenging"). Roughly two-thirds of Americans (66%) graded public schools C or worse in the areas that are most important to them individually. **This is why it is crucial for you to position school choice as an alternative that will deliver on the things that matter most to them.**

Poor education is a health threat.

37% say "lack of quality education" is the greatest day-to-day health threat facing children in America – over lack of physical exercise (19%), crime/gangs (17%), illegal drugs (16%), lack of nutrition (8%), personal injuries (2%), and long-term illness (1%). **When it stops being a discussion about bricks and buildings and bureaucracy and starts focusing on the actual life of the child, you can't lose.**

Americans support school choice – in theory.

In the most simple, generic fashion, two-thirds of Americans support school choice (67%), and less than one in ten oppose it (7%). **It's when you get into specific policies that support slips.**

Why don't people get involved? They don't know what to do.

Given a list of reasons for lack of involvement in education reform, 20% chose "I want to help, but I don't know how." 17% chose "The system is too large and set in its ways – I do not believe it will ever change." Another 17% chose "The unions have too tight a hold on public education – they will never relinquish control." 15% said "I have no real say in what happens in our schools," while only 6% chose "What happens in our schools doesn't directly affect me." **You have to give them actions to take and hope (and when possible, evidence) that change is possible.**

People are confused about the specifics of choice.

For example, nearly half of moms (47%) admit to having no idea how charter schools are funded, while nearly a quarter of the general population (23%) think they know, but are wrong. **You must educate people about the nuts and bolts of choice. Don't assume they know how a voucher, tax credit, or charter school**