

MEMORANDUM

From: FIL, Inc.
To: PIE Members
Re: Messaging Recommendations
Date: April 29, 2021

OVERVIEW: THE FIVE KEY PHRASES FOR RIGHT-LEANING AUDIENCES

There are five key phrases that articulate exactly what Republican parents want for their children – and what they want to avoid. Ignore them at your peril:

- (1) **“Even with all this new funding, it’s not how much you spend. It’s how efficiently and effectively you spend it.”** Republicans are looking for “results,” not spending – and those in charge of education budgets are about to get a lesson in fiscal prudence. If you can’t show where the money is going or the impact it had, you’re in big trouble.
- (2) **“It’s time to put students ahead of systems (or even schools). It’s not about the building. It’s about the child. Student-focused, personalized learning is the way forward. No more failing approaches from the outdated past.”** “Student-centered” isn’t just a buzzword. It has significant meaning for conservatives because it represents the personalized, individualized learning parents expect from education. There is real hostility and genuine opposition to the education bureaucracy (and to the bureaucrats themselves). In this case, it’s not just talking about who and what you are for (“*student achievement*”). It’s also emphasizing what or whom you are against (“*the bureaucracy and its waste of hard-earned taxpayer dollars*”).

If the new funding ends up in the classroom, you’ll be applauded. If it provides a more student-centered approach that increases reading comprehension and math literacy, you’ll get a standing ovation. But if it ends up in new bureaucratic buildings or lining the pockets of the local education bureaucracy or state departments of education, you’re in trouble. It really is that simple – and that difficult.

- (3) **“COVID set our students back. They feel it. Parents feel it. And we (elected officials/advocates for change/etc.) feel it too. But because of COVID, we now have a real opportunity -- and a responsibility -- to launch these students forward. Let’s not waste it. It’s time to make real change, for real students, in the real world.”** It is going to take years for parents to forgive the politicians and the education bureaucrats (and even the teachers unions) for closing down just about every school ... and keeping them closed for a year or more. Republicans need to address that anger in your messaging to prove that you understand, empathize, and won’t let it happen again. Those on the left are much more forgiving of teachers who did not want to return to the classroom. Republicans are not.

That’s why you need to focus on students – they’re the only sympathetic aspect of education right now. Moreover, you need to emphasize the reality of the situation.

Emphasizing that these are *real* students who were *really* hurt says you not only get it but are trying to address the damage.

- (4) **“Accountability is everything. All of this new funding is important, but we must always remember it is made possible by hardworking taxpayers. We owe it to them to go line by line, dollar by dollar, and make sure every cent goes where it belongs – to students in classrooms.”** This is important. The Left is likely to embrace “equity” as their highest priority. For Republicans and conservatives, it is about “accountability.” They want to know that every dime taken from hardworking taxpayers goes straight into the classroom. Anything less is considered theft.
- (5) **“It’s not the effort that matters. It’s the result. From college-based courses to work-based learning, students must be fully prepared for college, career, and real life.”** Not all conservatives want their children attending left-wing universities. Particularly in blue collar communities, parents want their children to have a marketable skill. In upper-middle class suburbs, the expectation is that high school prepares you for a successful college career. That’s why it is essential that you reflect both life paths when you talk about education. In fact, one of the most popular education “reforms” expands the various “career education” and “work-based learning” options. That’s the definition of “real life” to millions of parents.

EDUCATION: WHAT AMERICANS REALLY THINK

Covid is your shield, and language is your sword.

An overwhelming majority of Americans support increased funding for education. That support stretches across partisan lines, though most notably, the usually tight-fisted GOP loyalists are also in favor of more dollars flowing to the classroom. Democrats will measure success by how much you spend. Republicans will demand to know how you spent it and the difference it made.

With that in mind, here’s what we learned:

- 1) **Republicans do NOT know the details of the American Rescue Plan (ARP).** While there is considerable surface support for the ARP, based on our work over the past month, there is going to be considerable concern – and likely outrage – as they come to realize what the \$1.9 trillion dollar package includes. In particular, when they find out that just a tiny fraction of the education spending is actually going to open up schools in the Fall, that’s going to trigger a distaste for the rest of the spending. You have been warned.
- 2) **They are happy with the significant funding increases, but your language must personalize it.** COVID gives you some (SOME!) cover for the inordinate amount of money being spent in ways that similarly sized spending bills of the past were rejected. At fully 73% support for the ARP (only 7% against!), the results are overwhelming.

Even among Republican parents, it's a 61% to 13% support margin. We simply don't see numbers that cut across partisan lines like this in modern American politics.

But digging deeper into the weeds, the GOP reaction is less clear – and potentially much less favorable. Only 15% of Republicans know “a great deal” about the \$190 billion targeted towards education, compared to a sizeable 34% among Democrats. When Republicans come to realize how much is being spent – and the tax increases required to pay for it – support is going to drop.

- 3) **COVID is the cover, for now.** When the \$190 billion figure is put before respondents, a healthy majority of American parents (55%) say it's the “*appropriate amount,*” with another 19% even saying it's “*not enough.*” Only 12% say it's too much. But take a closer look among Republicans and a slightly different story emerges. A meaningful 19%, more than any other subgroup in the population say the \$190 billion is too much. Fully 69% of Democrats say that figure is the right amount, compared to just 45% of Republicans.

Warning: There will be immediate parent/voter outrage if schools start to claim that they don't have sufficient funding to open up safely, sensibly and on time in September.

- 4) **The status quo is no longer acceptable. So say it! Despite the rapidly increasing demand to “get back to normal,” half of all parents actually want to “rethink” education and try “new ways to teach students.”** This is a big deal because public opinion has always been against significant change.

50% of parents believe: “*We should use this new money to start to rethink how we educate our children and come up with new ways to teach students in light of the COVID crisis,*”

42% of parents instead think: “*We should use this new money to help students and teachers get back to the way things were before the COVID crisis as soon as it is safe to do so.*”

Read each response carefully. We loaded up the question to give the status quo the greatest likelihood of success, but the forces for change are still stronger. We asked a similar question a slightly different way, yet the conclusion holds up.

Fully 58% of parents say: “*This major new influx in federal funds opens the door to making bold changes in public education; we should take advantage of this opportunity.*” Conversely,

Only 34% of parents believe “*Now is not the time to make major changes in public education; we should stick to funding existing programs and getting things back to normal.*”

Combine the responses and you get a perfect TV ad or opening statement for every meeting, interview and town hall:

WORDS THAT WORK: THE PERFECT 30-SECOND AD

*“COVID was rough on all of us, but most of all on our children.
Let’s take this opportunity to make schools BETTER.
To put students FIRST. No more going back to the failed systems,
structures, and approaches of the past.
NOW is the time to invest this new money in students...
NOT bureaucracy – students.
Now is the time to rethink and reimagine education.
NOW is the time to put students first in all we do.”*

Warning: Republican parents are slightly less adventurous and definitely more skeptical of “new” approaches to education. For example, 67% of Democratic parents want to make “bold changes” in public education, compared to just 47% of Republican parents. So it’s important to include a reference to “tried and tested,” or “proven,” or “fact-based,” or even “back to basics.”

5) **Democratic parents are more supportive of the various education reform efforts than Republican parents.** Drilling down on the results, American parents overall support every reform effort and every education program by at least 60% ... and some has high as 76%. But recognize that Democratic parents are even more supportive across the board – with Republican parents more skeptical of each program and its effectiveness. For some of the programs and reform efforts, the differing levels of partisan support are staggering. Here are the most significant:

- A 21% gap in support for greater teacher diversity and skills.
- A 20% gap in support for \$500 direct grants to parents.
- A 20% gap in support for longer school days and longer school years.
- A 19% gap in providing free pre-K education and childcare.
- A 19% gap in providing special funding for kids with greater education needs.
- An 18% gap in expanding broadband access and upgrading technology.
- A 17% gap in promoting more innovative school assessment programs.
- A 17% gap in providing more online training for teachers.

There’s even greater Democratic parental support (+13%) for greater school options like charter schools and learning pods. We’ve never seen this before. Frankly, Democrats have never supported school reform to this universal degree...and Republicans have never been so skeptical. We don’t know how to communicate this finding and the impact it could have, but we’ll try. **ACT NOW!!**

Once again – and we will repeat this again and again... For Republicans, it's not what you spend ... or even how you spend it. It's the results from that spending that matter most.

- 6) **But beware: “transparency” and “accountability” are more than just words. They are DEMANDS.** Fully 91% (!!) of Americans say that *transparency* is “extremely” or “very” important to how these new funds are spent. Republicans and Democrats alike unanimously embrace the principle that:

“Parents have a right to know exactly how their education dollars are being spent – and that their elected officials have the responsibility to tell them accurately, honestly and immediately.”

This affords YOU the opportunity to be THEIR voice for “*responsible, efficient, and effective student and school spending.*” (Use those exact words.) To be precise, talk about “*education spending*” when it’s about the right to know because it’s more process oriented. But use “*student and school spending*” when it’s about your mission/objective. If your message *lacks* those key principles, their trust will turn to opposition.

- 7) **Parental evaluation of public schools has nosedived over the past year, and parents continue to worry about the impact of COVID.** With only 17% believing students in their state receive an “excellent” education, the intensity of education effectiveness has dropped significant. Yes, parents are still giving schools relatively good marks – but not nearly as good as prior to COVID.

But more importantly, the concern of COVID-driven developmental setbacks is widespread. Fully 67% of parents are either very or somewhat concerned that their child/children “*has not been making as much progress as they would in a typical year because of the Covid crisis.*” In the focus groups we’ve hosted over the past six months, parents have even cried, acknowledging how far their children have slipped both intellectually and emotionally. This acknowledgement of student “trauma” and the consequences is happening across the geographic, demographic and political divide – and so you should acknowledge it as well.

WORDS THAT WORK: WANT, NEED DESERVE

“We all know our children ...in every town and ever community across this country... have been set back by COVID.

They haven’t just missed school...

In so many ways, they’ve missed a part of their lives.

Now more than ever, we need to bring them back to the student-centered school they want ... so that each individual child receives the opportunities they need ...and the personalized approach they deserve.

21 Education Words for the 21st Century

Effective Education Excellence	Real, Measurable Results
Great Country = Great Schools	Student-centered
Reopening schools safely/sensibly	Rethink & Reimagine Schools
Real-World Situations	Problem Solving/ Critical Thinking Skills
Higher-Level Thinking	Inspiring/Motivating
Personalized approach	Effective Educational Tools
Genuine Accountability	Back to basics
Parental Involvement	Working Side-By-Side
Line-by-line, dollar-by-dollar	Intellectually Challenging
Believe in Better	More efficient & more effective
Preparation for College, Career, and Real Life	