Framing Social, Emotional, and Academic Development

A FrameWorks Pertinent Findings Memo

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Introduction

As the research community has come to greater consensus that interpersonal, intrapersonal, and subject matter skills are inextricably intertwined, the conversation about social, emotional, and academic development (SEAD) has expanded beyond expert circles and into the public discourse. *Sesame Street* now highlights lessons in impulse control, modeled by Cookie Monster, the beloved icon of poor self-restraint. Public awareness campaigns designed to reach parents of young children have proliferated, with information about social–emotional skills popping up everywhere—from the backs of cereal boxes to playground signage to parenting apps. Books exploring the mindsets needed to excel academically—and the parenting or teaching skills needed to foster them—are climbing the bestseller lists and shaping families’ expectations about school classrooms, curricula, culture, and climate.

The increased salience of the topic is a promising development, but proponents of Integrating SEAD into schools should take care not to assume that the current upward trajectory in SEAD awareness will continue uninterrupted, or that salience will necessarily translate into the changes in policy and practice advocated by members of the SEAD field. As seasoned reformers know well, just as having a solid idea isn’t enough to spark change, having a bit of momentum isn’t sufficient to sustain it. Large-scale adoption and implementation of an innovation require public understanding, public will, and even public demand—which, in turn, require advocates to engage the public. But the field should not assume that this increase in issue visibility is associated with public understandings of SEAD that align with those SEAD researchers and practitioners, or that this salience will translate into action and change.

Productive public engagement is no easy task. The SEAD conversation will become more fraught and fractured as recommendations continue to expand beyond early learning and into the K-12 realm, where the stakes are perceived to be higher and the systems and structures more centralized and crystallized. Unless proponents of Integrating SEAD can drive the narrative, draw in larger constituencies, navigate resistance, and tell a story that stands up to counter narratives, this promising and essential perspective runs the risk of becoming just another educational flavor of the month.

This report offers initial guidance on how to frame issues related to SEAD so that the widening circle of proponents continues to expand. The recommendations are based on a reanalysis of multiple bodies of the FrameWorks Institute’s research on the communications issues related to SEAD, including studies of public thinking and frame testing on the following topics:
• early childhood development (early learning, childhood adversity and resilience, executive function);

• child and youth behavioral issues (child mental health, moral development, school discipline, juvenile justice); and

• education and education reform.

In subsequent stages of this project, FrameWorks hopes to build on this knowledge-to-date report to develop and test framing hypotheses tailored to specific issues and challenges in building understanding and dislodging misperceptions about SEAD, yielding a comprehensive and cohesive narrative and communications strategy for promoting Integrating SEAD both within the education sector and beyond to the public. In the meantime, these recommendations equip communicators with insights about the drivers of public opinion and empirically based strategies for navigating the public discourse.

Just as initiatives and steps toward Integrating SEAD are based in evidence, so too should communications decisions be guided by empirical investigations into how to best communicate about SEAD issues. Strategic Frame Analysis®, an approach to communications research grounded in the cognitive and social sciences, offers a theoretically grounded and methodologically rigorous way to arrive at messages that allow the science on an issue to be translated effectively, rather than distorted, diluted, or dismissed. To provide access and help people use and apply the research findings that support efforts to translate and mobilize science and research on SEAD, this report is organized into four sections:

• An Expert Perspective Analysis offers a distilled set of key concepts that characterize Integrating SEAD—the “big ideas” that the field wants to get across to the public. This perspective guides FrameWorks researchers in the query and reanalysis of our database of framing studies.

• A Public Perspective Analysis summarizes FrameWorks’ findings on cultural models (or widely shared patterns of public thinking) regarding Integrating SEAD. These cultural models shape public opinion on Integrating SEAD and provide insight into whether and why certain frames will build—or undermine—support for it.

• A Summary of Communications Challenges explains the communications implications of the cultural models that the public uses to reason about social–emotional development and related issues.
- *Initial Reframing Recommendations* offers strategies and tools for shaping communications to expand the issue's constituency base, spark productive dialogue with the public and policymakers, and build support for meaningful system changes.
The Expert Perspective Analysis

Strategic Frame Analysis begins by distilling the expert consensus on the big ideas that the public needs to know to become more informed, less susceptible to misinformation or spin, and better equipped to engage in a productive dialogue about the proposals advanced in the public square. A clear sense of communications goals is essential to any effective plan for engaging and informing the public about a social or scientific issue. In addition to deciding on traditional communications metrics like reach, it is critical to articulate the desired conceptual outcomes of the field’s communications efforts.

Arriving at these key concepts is not a trivial endeavor, as academic researchers are more accustomed to talking to peers than to the public, and experts are more likely to make fine-grained distinctions than to articulate where their assumptions overlap with others working on their topic. To assist with the goal of synthesizing and tightly condensing the field’s underlying assumptions and points of agreement, FrameWorks has found that it is helpful to organize points as answers to a sequence of questions that help establish the fundamental contours of the topic: Why does this issue matter? How does it work? What prevents it from working? And what should be done to improve the situation?

To explore and distill how SEAD experts answer these questions, FrameWorks researchers conducted a facilitated discovery session with members of the Council of Distinguished Scientists, an organization affiliated with the Aspen Institute’s National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, to clarify the scope of inquiry and capture panelists’ thinking. The information gleaned from this session was supplemented by a review of documents provided by the Commission. With topics of interest thus identified, researchers queried the FrameWorks database of interviews with experts, as well as existing analyses of expert perspectives from previous research projects, accessing studies that the organization has conducted over the past two decades on issues related to social–emotional development (that is, early brain development, child mental health, executive function, moral development, and resilience). We pulled common themes from the documents and interviews and categorized them using a basic grounded theory method. Using this approach, we arrived at a refined set of themes that reflect expert perspectives on SEAD. These themes are presented below according to the following narrative outline:

1. What is SEAD and why is it important to integrate into K-12?
2. How does SEAD work?
3. How should SEAD be integrated into K-12?
4. What prevents SEAD from being effectively integrated into K-12?

1. What is SEAD and why is it important to integrate into K-12?

Social-emotional development refers to the process by which children acquire and apply the skills necessary to identify and manage emotions, set and accomplish positive goals, empathize with others, create and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible choices. SEAD is the integration of social and emotional development with academic learning in K-12 education. It reflects the understanding that interpersonal, intrapersonal, and subject-matter competencies are functionally integrated and mutually reinforcing; thus, education should approach each student with equal intentionality and value. Experts point to several bodies of evidence to make the case for integrating SEAD in K-12. It:

- **Yields tangible benefits to the wellbeing of students and the adults they become.** Positive social–emotional development is important because it has robust effects on health and wellbeing across the lifespan. Components of social–emotional development predict success across a variety of domains that influence quality of life, including socioeconomic status, health, and relationships.

- **Supports and improves academic outcomes.** The ability to focus, manage emotions, and stay engaged plays a large role in students’ ability to learn. Students who can plan and organize tasks, cope with challenges, and persist despite difficulty are better equipped to master content knowledge, develop and refine academic skills, and generally manage the demands of schooling.

- **Helps the K-12 education system fulfill its purpose.** Fully integrating SEAD in K-12 settings would not only lead to better outcomes for students but would also yield important benefits to society. Social–emotional capabilities and mindsets are demanded by the modern workforce, with employers placing a high value on the ability to communicate, solve problems, think critically, be resilient, persevere, and work in teams. These skills are also essential to a functioning, pluralistic democracy, equipping the next generation to fulfill its role in our civic body. By preparing students to participate economically and civically, SEAD can also help reduce disparities in school outcomes experienced by marginalized children of color, children in low-income families, and children with special needs. Thus, integrating SEAD helps secure many of the collective benefits that society expects from a well-functioning education system.
2. **How does SEAD work?**

**Social, emotional, and academic skills are interrelated.** Experts argue that sets of skills often considered to be distinct—cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal—are in fact functionally indivisible, neither learned nor used in isolation. They explain that a child “can’t do one without the others” and that their combination is essential for positive developmental and learning outcomes.

**Social, emotional, and academic skills are built over time through an active, and interactive, process.** A developmental perspective is, by definition, a process that unfolds over time—beginning at birth and extending through young adulthood. Experts note that development is an active process that involves dynamic interactions between an individual, his or her biology, and the environment. Experts hold a complex model of learning—built on a substantial empirical base about how children learn—in which a skill is developed through multiple opportunities for application, rehearsal, and feedback. Interactions with “more expert others” are essential, and these mentors can range from family caregivers to older children or peers to professional educators.

**Skill development is contingent on opportunities and supports.** Experts note that skill development is “environmentally informed”—dependent on interactions among individuals and their surrounding contexts. Skill development is therefore malleable and shaped by experiences. As a result, there is a risk of both missed opportunities and negative outcomes if appropriate opportunities to develop skills are not provided, and great potential for interventions to improve outcomes by strengthening children’s social–emotional development.

**Formal learning settings are key sites for providing the opportunities and supports for fostering SEAD.** Experts argue that schools are critical contexts for developing and strengthening social and emotional skills. They reject the premise of questions about whether social and emotional skills are “appropriate” for school settings, noting that learning invariably and inherently involves interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects. Learning is reciprocal and interactive, depends on human connection and relationships, and has emotional content. A more intentional approach to attending to these aspects of the learning process would be more aligned with what is known about the way people learn. Because learning is a social, emotional, and academic endeavor, schools need to acknowledge that SEAD is in line with their core mission.

3. **How should SEAD be integrated into K-12?**

Experts note that integrating SEAD can be approached and implemented in many ways but that effective approaches are likely to share key characteristics. These include:
True integration—not an add-on, afterthought, or alternative. Experts contend that attention to SEAD should inform the full range of decisions about how schools are organized: curriculum and instruction, school culture and climate, educator preparation and expectations, family and community partnerships, policies and procedures, and resource allocations. Thus, in the expert understanding of integrating SEAD, it is not a “program” to be wedged into the current model of K-12 education but rather a perspective and set of goals that call for a serious rethinking of many aspects of the design of schools and systems. That said, experts also note that SEAD does not call for a shift “from” academics “to” social–emotional learning but rather seeks to improve academic and life outcomes by acknowledging and incorporating their connection to interpersonal and intrapersonal skills.

Explicit and intentional instruction to strengthen social and emotional skill sets. Experts assert that a call for “integration” does not mean that skills cannot, at times, be strengthened through isolated or targeted practice. They note that effective approaches to SEAD include some degree of targeted learning opportunities that focus squarely on improving specific social or emotional competencies, like impulse control, task perseverance, or participating effectively in groups. These learning opportunities work best when they are developmentally appropriate and involve experiences that help learners recognize, practice, and receive feedback on social–emotional skills.

Attention to interpersonal relationships and interactions. Experts note that integrating SEAD involves attention to relationships between adults and students, as well as among students. Integrating SEAD is characterized by intentional efforts by educators to build meaningful relationships with individual students and efforts by administrators to create the conditions that make such relationships possible, such as schedules that provide opportunities for teachers and students to interact over longer periods of time. Effective approaches to integrating SEAD also devote time, energy, and attention to supporting positive interactions and relationships among students. When relationships in schools are supported in these ways, the result is a welcoming, inclusive, and engaging learning environment.

Professional support and development for educators. Experts understand that to fully integrate SEAD, educators must have training and professional development. They also recognize that, in addition to implementing new policies, many schools will need to devote additional resources to make more general improvements to school climate.

Community involvement. Experts emphasize that community involvement is key to integrating SEAD, both because the desired changes require public support and because true integration spills beyond school walls and affects the way other actors engage with young people. Effectively
integrating SEAD thus requires multiple stakeholders—such as families, community service providers, law enforcement—to come together to provide comprehensive supports for students.

4. What prevents the integration of SEAD into K-12 education?

The idea to integrate SEAD is not new; parents, teachers, and others work on these skills with young people every day. However, the level of integration that SEAD experts envision encounters systemic barriers. These include the following:

Current accountability systems encourage a narrowing of the curriculum. Experts argue that SEAD has been crowded out of school culture and curricula. Pressures related to time, capacity, and test-based accountability have diminished attention to subjects and skills beyond reading and math. In this climate, innovations must “prove” their potential to increase student achievement in these domains before adoption.

Current capacity for implementation is limited. Presently, new teachers do not receive adequate pre-service preparation in SEAD theory or application, and opportunities for ongoing professional development in SEAD are limited—and in some cases, non-existent.

Structural changes in school design are complex and can meet resistance. Because integrating SEAD can involve significant changes to school design and culture—affecting the way people, time, and material resources are used and distributed—a high level of integration is more difficult to achieve than a superficial nod to the concept. For low-performing or under-resourced schools, necessary changes can meet additional barriers. In schools that serve student populations with high levels of poverty, biases about class or race can dampen enthusiasm for SEAD. For instance, in school settings that have high levels of unwanted student behavior, stakeholders are likely to express serious concerns about anything that is perceived as “weakening” discipline measures. Thus, the very schools that would benefit most from integrating SEAD may be the least likely to adopt it.

Lack of public awareness, understanding, and support for integrating SEAD. Experts note that the barriers above could be substantially reduced if decision-makers and stakeholders were more informed about the interconnected nature of skills and the range of benefits that accrue from integrating SEAD.
The Public Perspective Analysis

The public brings a rich and complex set of cultural models—widely shared patterns of understanding—to the task of thinking and talking about children’s SEAD. Because members of the public rely on cultural models to reason, process information, and formulate opinions about specific issues, communicators can benefit from having a systematic analysis of these sources of public opinion. At times, these cultural models align with expert content, thereby facilitating the communication of expert perspectives. But more frequently, cultural models impede or even distort the meanings that members of the public take from the stories that experts and advocates wish to tell. To avoid cuing patterns of public understanding that block communications goals, communicators must be aware of which cultural models are applied in making sense of their messages and how people use them to think and make decisions about an issue.

A map of relevant cultural models allows issue advocates to anticipate when and why their messages and ideas might be misunderstood, and to plan accordingly to prevent miscommunication, reduce resistance, and promote comprehension. For instance, members of the public tend to understand emotional skills as distinct from—and even in competition with—subject matter knowledge and academic skills. Because this understanding is at odds with the expert perspective that social, emotional, and academic skills are intertwined and mutually reinforcing, a public engagement strategy must include effective ways to address and resolve this dominant public understanding.

Cultural models are, by definition, durable and widely shared. These characteristics are the primary reasons that Strategic Frame Analysis relies on cultural models analyses as the foundational way of understanding the “audience” for science translation initiatives—efforts that will invariably need to reach many constituencies, in different formats, over a significant period of time. FrameWorks has conducted dozens of cultural models studies on a variety of issues pertinent to SEAD. These studies are based on data from cognitive interviews, which are analyzed according to principles and techniques from psychological anthropology. Researchers analyze sizable samples of talk—taken from extended, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews—to capture the assumptions that people use to make sense of information. For this report, researchers queried the FrameWorks database of analyses of public thinking, pulling from studies that the organization has conducted over the past two decades on issues related to integrating SEAD such as early childhood development (including child mental health, executive function, and resilience to adversity), education reform, and moral development. Throughout this document, we provide quotes from the cognitive interviews to illustrate key concepts.
This section elaborates on the cultural models that are likely to become active when experts and advocates seek to engage the public and policymakers on integrating SEAD. To allow for easier comparison with the expert perspective, it is arranged according to the same sequence of questions that guided the previous section:

1. What is SEAD and why is it important to integrate into K-12?
2. How does SEAD work?
3. How should SEAD be integrated into K-12?
4. What prevents SEAD from being effectively integrated into K-12?

1. **What is SEAD and why is it important?**

   The public’s definition of skills, and its understanding of the process by which skills develop, is guided by a set of deep and failure-obstinate cultural models. Previous FrameWorks studies have indicated that these cultural models are likely to shape the way the public defines and prioritizes integrating SEAD.

   **The purpose of school is to impart academic skills, and academic skills are “the basics.”** Americans share an assumption that education is built in a linear and hierarchical way in which the “basics”—often defined as the “3Rs”—are prerequisites to all future learning. By extension, if learning doesn’t happen, the solution is not to update or improve pedagogy but rather to “return” to the basics. This back-to-the-basics model also brings with it zero-sum thinking, in which innovations are seen as peripheral “add-ons” that take time, attention, and resources away from what really matters. Reasoning that *more innovation=less basics*, the public resists reforms that focus on skills other than literacy or numeracy.

   **Skills are a commodity.** Americans across the ideological spectrum default to the assumption that the primary purpose of education is to provide the necessary knowledge and skills to secure work that provides financial security and success to individuals. Within this model, people think of skills as a commodity that young people acquire primarily for their own, largely financial benefit. Within this consumerist frame, in which skills are commodified in service of private gain, the broader societal goals for public education, such as citizen participation or public health, are obscured. At that point, there is little to no consideration of whether policy proposals are effective in enhancing collective benefits or contributing skills that advance the common good. Seen as a commodity, skills are things that individuals acquire for their own personal, financial benefit. This obscures the social and civic benefits of education, as well as the value of skills that are less directly seen to translate into financial gains.
Social and emotional development are unrelated to academic skills and capacities. Members of the public have difficulty appreciating that cognitive, academic, linguistic, emotional, and social capacities develop—and are used—in tandem. Instead, people view cognitive and academic skills as distinct from the more basic “life” and “people” skills of sociality, communication, and self-control. This split between cognitive and academic skills on the one hand and social and emotional skills on the other derives from and informs the way people think about how skills are developed and used. “Life skills” are assumed to develop outside of school, whereas cognitive skills—which are assumed to require hard work, individual effort, and motivation—develop in school. In short, the public has little basis to understand the interconnected nature of cognitive, emotional, and social capabilities (and the brain circuits that underlie them). Consider this interview excerpt:

**Participant:** A lot of this needs to be taken care of at home, as far as life skills. But I do believe that we need to hold the schools accountable. We were fortunate that we were able to put our children in private school in their beginning years, in the younger years. They were fortunate to get phonics and things that were important that helped them to grow from there.

For experts, cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal skills are developmentally and functionally intertwined. For ordinary Americans, these skills develop in separate domains and are distinct in their applications. Communicators will need to engage in careful and repeated reframing to navigate the public’s default assumption of compartmentalized skills and instead find ways to foreground the interrelationships among these domains in terms of their development and application.

Morals, manners, and responsibility are what matter. In studies on issues such as early learning, juvenile justice, school discipline, and moral development, FrameWorks researchers have found that Americans assume that a key part of development is learning “right from wrong” and aligning behavior with this understanding. Two interview excerpts provide illumination:

**Participant:** I think that kids who develop good skills—as far as listening, respect, and honesty—when they’re young carry those into everything in their lives as they get older, and it makes other relationships less difficult because you have those good skills.

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**Participant:** Paying attention would be a sign of doing well! The child should be quiet, speak when spoken to, answer, contribute, raise their hand, speak to someone, voice their opinion. Not with foul language. Not with animosity.
This model involves the thinking that “doing well” in childhood and adolescence is related to compliance with adult expectations, indicated by a young person’s ability to listen to adults, follow their directions, and avoid actions that adults would consider misbehavior. It also involves a set of assumptions about positive interactions with peers: “Getting along with others” is a valued characteristic. This model doesn’t contrast directly with expert understanding, but it does not match it in sophistication or nuance. The list of behavioral patterns and interactional capacities that the public values is notably shorter, and notably more slanted toward compliance, than the complex set of skills that experts refer to when communicating about social and emotional development.

**Communication is key.** In addition to emphasizing the development of responsibility and compliant behavior, members of the public also view communication—the ability to effectively convey one’s own thoughts and feelings through words—as a critical marker of positive development. Parents and parenting practices figure prominently in the public’s understanding of where these communication skills come from and how they develop:

**Participant:** I [a parent] just want to make sure that when they learn, they can express themselves, no matter what they learn. No matter what they know—“I like this,” “I don’t like this,” “I want this,” “I don’t want this”—they need to be able to say that.

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**Participant:** I think number one is the ability to communicate—be it verbally or written. If you don’t have [...] communication skills, you’re not going to function in society—period.

The public’s focus on the importance of communication as a key measure of positive development and emerging competence is well aligned with experts’ understanding of the critical role that language development plays in social–emotional learning and other skills and capacities. But unlike experts, members of the public are not attuned to the interactive and reciprocal processes by which communication skills develop. Communicators will need to identify and deploy additional tools that help the public understand the contingent processes by which language and other communicative and social–emotional capacities develop.

### 2. How does SEAD work?

Members of the public understand relatively little about the processes and mechanisms that underlie SEAD. In reasoning about how students develop social, emotional, and academic capabilities, members of the public tend to fall back on default models of individualism, automaticity, parental omnipotence, teacher responsibility, and learning through “osmosis.”
Development is a black box. People readily use the term *develop* to describe the gradual acquisition of skills and capacities through natural growth and maturation. Yet FrameWorks research has found that this conventionalized language masks an underlying fuzziness about how development works. For ordinary Americans, the processes and mechanisms of development remain obscure, opaque, and difficult to articulate. This black box thinking limits people’s ability to evaluate proposals that affect developmental outcomes. Moreover, the black box does not stay empty. Lacking a satisfying explanation for what happens, how it happens, and to what effect, the public falls back on default assumptions, which are described below.

It’s all about the family. Among the most prevalent and deeply held convictions shared by Americans is the idea that developmental outcomes depend primarily and almost exclusively on the behaviors and decisions of their parents. When people reason from this model, they think of child and youth development as something that happens in the home, under the purview of the parents, and beyond the influence of outside contextual factors. Consider the following exchanges:

**Interviewer:** If you had to explain to me why this child is doing well, what would you say?

**Participant:** It’s really just because they have a supportive, loving environment and home.⁷

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**Interviewer:** Tell me why a child might not be doing well.

**Participant:** Well, look at the kids living in the ghetto. Their parents just aren’t choosing to keep ’em in school, and they aren’t making sure they’re not running around with a neighborhood gang ... I mean, that makes a big difference.⁸

In this model—what FrameWorks calls the *Family Bubble*—the home is thought of as a bounded, almost impermeable space, with the relationships between parents and children sealed off from the influence of external contextual factors.⁹ (Indeed, in the exchanges above, the participant notes the existence of serious social problems, such as neighborhood violence, but locates the solution to them in parental behaviors.) The *Family Bubble* represents the first and often last place people go in their thinking to explain development. This model mutes attention to the importance of contextual conditions, supports, and relationships that affect children and families.¹⁰ This pattern of reasoning is particularly powerful in thinking about the development of children age 0 to about 10 but shapes thinking on adolescent development as well. However, it is important to note that as the public thinks about older children and adolescents, this *Family Bubble* becomes perforated as the influence of agents outside of the family—primarily understood as friends and peers—gains greater...
prominence in how people understand development.

**Social-emotional skills are learned through “osmosis.”** *Family Bubble* thinking is noticeably devoid of active parent-child engagement. This reveals another model that Americans use to make sense of development: *osmosis.* This model involves the thinking that skills are acquired through a passive process whereby children—through physical proximity—automatically and naturally absorb the skills and capacities displayed by their parents. Consider the following quotes:

**Participant:** Not that you say, “Okay, I am going to teach you how to be responsible today,” but you just do it yourself as a parent and, again, I think that optimally it would come from a parent.

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**Participant:** [If] a child […] has both parents in the home, and the parents are fairly happy, then that child comes out; they look better, they act better, they respond better because they have an example. They have a structure at home that says, oh okay, life is good, you know, as opposed to a child that may be in a single-parent home.

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**Participant:** So, if you are around people that speak, if you are around intellectuals a lot, you’re going to speak [like an] intellectual. Just by osmosis, it has to [be]. It’s a fact. And so, people disagree with me, but I prove it time and time [again], that that’s the truth in life, so a kid—a competent kid—is going to be around competent people.

This assumption contrasts directly with the expert perspective that skill development is quintessentially an active and interactive process that involves practice, feedback, and support.

**Willpower drives outcomes.** Another patterned and pervasive assumption is that young people themselves are accountable for their circumstances and outcomes, whether they be positive or negative. The force behind a good result, in this model, is drive. The following quotes provide examples:

**Interviewer:** What is success? What does that mean?

**Participant:** Just kind of … getting out of life whatever you want, you know? You can go as far as you want. If you'll just put your mind to it, that stuff is part of success; just accomplishing things.

**Interviewer:** Where does it come from?

**Participant:** The will to want to do it. You’ve got to have will to get somewhere.\(^{11}\)
Interviewer: What is the most important thing in explaining how a child is developing and how they are doing?\textsuperscript{12}

Participant: Determination. Just really wanting it. Wanting to succeed, to rise above, whatever the situation is. And I don’t know where you get it, but it’s just pride and determination.\textsuperscript{13}

Participant: You gotta have the ability to accept that some circumstances just aren’t gonna be the way you wanted them, and then you have to power through it in some way.\textsuperscript{14}

The \textit{Willpower} model is foundational to American thinking. It is perhaps more readily applied to explain adult behaviors and outcomes, but children and youth are by no means excluded. FrameWorks research has shown that the public recruits this model to explain a wide range of children’s issues, including child mental health, education, juvenile justice, resilience to adversity, youth development, and substance misuse.

This model presents a serious challenge to those communicating about SEAD. This “default setting” means that, in the absence of careful framing, Americans are likely to assume that integrating SEAD is a solution to a problem that wouldn’t exist if individual students simply tried harder; using this logic, the failure or success of SEAD is directly and exclusively contingent on how much willpower and drive students put into learning these capabilities and practicing these mindsets.

3. How should SEAD be integrated into K-12?

Most of the cultural models that the public has available to them are likely to direct them toward rejecting, rather than embracing, effective approaches to integrating SEAD. Default ways of thinking about changing education systems lead the public to assume that reforms are either simple or destined to fail.

Find teachers who care. Americans have a deep and highly dominant model that defines “good” teachers primarily and almost exclusively by their “caring” dispositions. Although the affective relationships between students and teacher are important—and attention to these relationships is indeed a critical component of integrating SEAD—the \textit{Caring Teacher} model brings with it some unproductive assumptions. Most notably, this model also involves the assumption that caring for students is an innate, personal quality that cannot be taught. According to this line of reasoning, a teacher either “has what it takes” or doesn’t, as the following quote shows:
Participant: Some people are meant to be teachers and some people aren’t. [You might have] a teacher that really doesn’t care, like, “Okay, you didn’t turn in your homework, I’m just going to mark you down bad.” [Whereas another] one is like, “All right, you know what? We’ll work on some of this and we’ll do something for you, or you know, let’s work something out.” Some people just have that, and some people don’t. Like some people are meant to be teachers and some people aren’t.\textsuperscript{15}

The assumption that good teachers are born—not made—obscures the importance of teacher knowledge and training, as well as the role of institutional supports that provide teachers with opportunities to develop their professional skills. Because effectively integrating SEAD will require changes to teacher preparation and professional development, communicators must tread carefully when talking about the necessary habits, skills, and dispositions of teachers. Otherwise, they will step into a trap of public thinking about effective teaching that is hard to escape.

**Change the cost-benefit calculations of misbehaving kids.** Proponents of SEAD assert that problems in school climate, such as the disproportionate impact of exclusionary discipline on children of color, could be effectively addressed by changes in the way schools approach social–emotional learning. In contrast, ordinary Americans start from the assumption that student misbehavior is a rational and wholly individual choice. They reason that young people weigh the costs and benefits of “acting out,” calculate the probability of being held accountable for misbehavior, and then commit the infractions they think they can get away with. FrameWorks researchers have found that this *Rational Actor* model strongly influences people’s opinions about school climate issues, leading them to support stronger punitive measures. One implication for SEAD advocates is that when the conversation turns to discipline, special care must be taken to build understanding of how increased social–emotional competencies address the causes of unwanted behavior and how school climate can either promote or reduce the likelihood of students’ pro-social behaviors.

**Go back to the basics.** Americans assume that the process of acquiring skills is much like ascending a set of stairs, with mastery of one step serving as the platform and prerequisite for the next. This, then, creates a dynamic in which a proposal for improvement must essentially “move backward” to address a highlighted problem, as the following quote illustrates:

Participant: I think we have just wandered away from basic hard education, thinking that a lot of fancy window dressings suddenly creates a better educational system, and it doesn’t.

In addition, Americans draw on powerful senses of nostalgia and personal experience. Americans
tend to resist calls to reform curricula and focus on new sets of skills. They do this, in part, because they compare calls for change with their own experiences with the system. From this nostalgic vantage point, Americans reason as follows: “It worked for me, so why would we change it now? We need to go back to what worked.” When reasoning from this perspective, the public is highly skeptical of approaches or innovations that are perceived to be unrelated to, or in competition with, “the basics.” Given that integrating SEAD can be easily construed in these ways, Back to Basics thinking constitutes a major framing challenge.

4. What prevents SEAD from being effectively integrated into K-12?

Experts understand the challenges that face full incorporation of SEAD in K-12 but have a sense of what implementation will require and how it should come about. Regardless of the kinds of reform under consideration, members of the public bring with them a deep sense of fatalism about the possibility of meaningful reform.

The threat of modernity. Americans are concerned about the deterioration of societal structures, including families and communities. The public is likely to point to factors such as family dispersal, single-parent homes, erosion of faith-based institutions, a lagging economy, or other “negative” social trends as causes and symptoms of the degradation of moral norms. Reasoning from this model, people are likely to see these negative trends as part and parcel of modern life—the price we pay for living in the modern world. In this way, people are unlikely to conclude that public interventions can change outcomes and become fatalistic in thinking about solutions.

The “broken” education system. Americans of every stripe and location find it easy to agree that the nation’s public education system is failing, with the observation that “the system is broken” running as a constant refrain throughout public discourse. Indeed, advocates for change often draw on and reinforce this point of view, pointing to stark statistics about educational failure to make the case for desired reforms. Advocates for integrating SEAD should resist this temptation, as the Broken Education System model brings with it some heavy and harmful baggage. When the public is focused on the failures of the education system, they become more hesitant—not more eager—to embrace innovative reforms. A perception of a history of widespread failure can also translate into a prediction that attempts at change will fail, as the following quote illustrates.

Participant: [The question is] how do you do that? I don’t know if that’s realistic in our society ... You’re not gonna fix the problem.
Thinking from the Broken Education System model, people easily find their way to fatalism and fear, which shuts down forward thinking and imagination about the possibilities of promising reforms. To navigate this model, proponents of integrating SEAD will need to find frames that inspire a sense of efficacy and a “can do” attitude about change.
Summary of Communications Challenges

In many cases, the public’s widely shared assumptions and patterns of reasoning run directly counter to expert consensus. Recognizing these default cultural models and understanding how they shape public thinking are critical first steps in crafting effective communications. Below, we summarize the major communications challenges that emerge from examining the concepts that experts and advocates want to convey and the patterns of public thinking that they will likely face.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The public thinks …</th>
<th>This pattern of thinking challenges SEAD communicators because it …</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School is for “the basics,” which are defined as literacy and numeracy.</td>
<td>Impedes understanding of the intertwined nature of social, emotional, and academic skills, and saps support for forward-thinking reforms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social-emotional development is unrelated to academic skills and capacities.</td>
<td>Blocks understanding of the ways in which social, emotional, cognitive, and linguistic skills develop and are used together, and blocks support for measures designed around this interdependence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morals, manners, and responsibility are the most important social–emotional outcomes for children.</td>
<td>Focuses attention on a narrow set of behavioral outcomes, rather than the complex constellation of skills and capacities that comprise social–emotional development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication is an important “life skill” for children to learn.</td>
<td>Lacks acknowledgement of the interactive process by which language skills are learned in tandem with social–emotional skills (although it is consistent with expert understanding about the critical role of language development).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development is a black box.</td>
<td>Depresses support for integrating SEAD by making it difficult to see how such efforts could improve outcomes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Family Bubble determines development.</td>
<td>Mutes attention to the multiple environments and supports that affect school-age children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning “just happens” through a passive process of absorption, like osmosis.</td>
<td>Makes it difficult to appreciate how positive development is not automatic but rather contingent on positive, supportive experiences, relationships, and environments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivated children will learn.</td>
<td>Obscures messages about the role of context and environment in the development and enactment of SEAD and how integrating SEAD will more deeply engage students in the learning process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good teachers “care,” and they are born, not made.</td>
<td>Blocks understanding of the need for teacher training and professional development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern society is broken.</td>
<td>Saps public will for changes that are understood as compensating for the deterioration of the civic and social fabric.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The education system is broken.</td>
<td>Decreases people’s sense that education reforms will ultimately improve outcomes; depresses efficacy and engagement.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Initial Communications Reframing Recommendations

The following recommendations, culled from various FrameWorks studies into effective ways to communicate about topics connected to SEAD, are designed to address the challenges enumerated above. These recommendations equip communicators with sound ways of navigating the complicated public discourse and ways of thinking about SEAD and integrating SEAD. Many of the recommendations involve metaphors, which help explain key scientific concepts in a succinct, easy-to-understand manner.

General Communications Strategies

To elevate the importance of integrating SEAD, communicators need framing strategies to dislodge unproductive cultural models and open new, more productive ways of thinking. Consistently using such strategies is key to advancing public understanding of integrating SEAD.

Tell a systems story. A wealth of research and experience shows that stories are central to communicating about social change. However, the fact that people think in terms of story is not fully leveraged by social issue communicators. In addition, we know that not all stories are equally effective at achieving communications goals like building understanding, increasing issue salience, and boosting support for changes to policy and practice.

Social science research has found that episodic stories, which tell stories from an individual perspective to illuminate an issue by personalizing it, lead people to attribute outcomes to the individuals involved rather than to broader systems. By contrast, thematic stories, which foreground systemic factors and the role of context as key aspects of story, are more effective at helping people understand social problems and support policy and systems-level solutions. Thematic stories typically adhere to the following structure, which is described in more detail below. They:

1. Lead with a value that orients people to why the issue matters and refer back to that value throughout the communication. They focus on values that help people answer the questions “Why does this matter?” and “What is this about?” at a collective rather than an individual level.

2. Introduce the problem and explain its contextual dimensions. They explain how the problem works, the challenges to positive outcomes, and how systems and society affect it.
3. Include a *solution* that addresses the problem, and explain *how* it works to create different outcomes.

**Balance urgency and efficacy.** Communicators want to address how integrating SEAD can address problems within and outside of the education system. These messages frequently evoke a strong and dominant sense of urgency, and occasionally veer into crisis. These types of problem statements should *always* be paired with well-framed discussions of solutions. In the absence of such discussions, people are likely to fall back on default assumptions that “this problem is simply too big to solve.” Communications are more effective when urgency is paired with efficacy, or the feeling that feasible actions will address problems and improve outcomes. People need to know that integrating SEAD addresses serious problems, but they also must have a strong sense that integrating SEAD will improve a wide range of outcomes. SEAD communicators must be careful to not focus myopically on the problem in their efforts to increase the salience of integrating SEAD.

**Use concrete scenarios and examples to deepen public knowledge of social and emotional skills and how they develop.** The preceding analysis of public thinking reveals that the public holds well-practiced assumptions about what is meant by social–emotional learning and skills. Because the public’s existing definitions and models are in many ways at odds with the scientific understanding, carefully chosen scenarios or examples are likely to be effective in shaping and expanding public thinking.

In a recent study into how to deepen parents’ understandings of early social-emotional development, FrameWorks researchers tested the effects of a scenario that juxtaposed children’s and caregivers’ internal perspectives of a familiar but emotionally laden event, such as a public tantrum. Analysis of parents’ reactions showed that such explanations improved parents’ understanding of the developmental underpinnings of children’s challenging behaviors and countered unproductive patterns of thinking on social and emotional learning.

FrameWorks has found that examples can be powerful frame cues that concretize the importance of SEAD and how it is effectively incorporated into school environments. An example’s effectiveness is closely tied to what it is an example of and to how it is presented. Effective examples of integrating SEAD will explain *how* integration leads to improved outcomes. They will *not* be examples of individual student success, nor will they be brief mentions or lists of programs. Importantly, examples should not just describe integrating SEAD; rather, they should provide a clear causal pathway that (1) lays out a particular challenge, (2) describes how integrating SEAD addresses that challenge, and (3) details the positive (and collective) outcomes of that result.
Contextualize numbers; don’t expect them to speak for themselves. The use of numbers and statistics can be an effective communications strategy, but only if they are properly framed. Although the meaning of a given data point or statistic may be obvious to experts and advocates, the public is likely to interpret numbers in unexpected and potentially unproductive ways—unless they are placed within a frame that aids interpretation and guides meaning-making. This means presenting numbers as Social Math. Social Math is a framing strategy that translates data into more comprehensible and compelling terms by offering comparisons with familiar domains on a relatable scale. Using Social Math channels interpretation in particular directions. When done well, Social Math broadens public understanding of an issue and leads an audience to think constructively about solutions.

Recommended Frame Elements

The following recommended frame elements or themes have been developed and tested in FrameWorks research to achieve specific framing objectives, such as foregrounding the interrelated nature of skills or providing a more affirming view of the possibility of meaningful reform. These are initial and preliminary recommendations because these frame elements have not yet been tested specifically for their ability to boost support for integrating SEAD (although they have shown measurable and significant effects on neighboring issues). Future phases of work should investigate the ability of these frames to build understanding and support for the policies and practices that promote effectively integrating SEAD.

Orient audiences to the societal benefits of integrating SEAD by opening communications with the value of Human Potential. Values, or broad ideals about what’s desirable and good, act as a powerful directive, guiding attitudes, reasoning, and decisions that follow. Opening communications with a value can effectively orient people’s thinking on the topic, making it more likely that they will engage productively with the information that follows. When used at the beginning of a conversation or communication, values are a more effective way of engaging people in an issue than framing it as a crisis. Of several values that FrameWorks has tested experimentally, Human Potential has shown impressive results in shifting public thinking on personalized learning, multi-modal and authentic assessment, and equity issues.

This value frame might be used at the top of a communication in this way: We need the talents and contributions of all learners to be available to our communities. Note that this reframe highlights the community as the beneficiary of the students’ potential, rather than the students themselves. Both benefits exist, of course, but strategic framing is a process of making intentional choices, and if the goal is to build public will, then the public nature of the issue must be stressed. Expressing the
benefits of SEAD in collective rather than individual terms is an important part of a strategy of establishing proposed changes to education as a public good.

**Compare the concurrent development of social, emotional, and academic skills to the weaving of a rope.** Because the default cultural models available to the public lead them to conceptualize skills as separate and hierarchical, a key reframing task is to build understanding of the ways in which these skills are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. FrameWorks has found that making an analogy between skill development and the process of weaving or braiding can channel thinking away from zero-sum thinking about “important” skills and “nice extras”—or about the discrete nature of skill types. Instead, it can open productive consideration of the ways in which social, emotional, and academic skills enhance one another—that they develop and are used together.16

The *Weaving Skills Ropes* explanatory metaphor can be used like this:

Learning is a process of weaving skills together and getting practice in using the rope that results. No single skill can do all the work. Instead, for the rope to be strong and usable, each skill needs to be strong and must be woven tightly together with other skills. As we learn new social, emotional, and academic skills, our brains weave these strands together and we use them to do all the things we need to be able to do: solve problems, work with others, formulate and express our ideas, and make and learn from mistakes. Children need lots of opportunities to learn how to weave skills together to practice using the ropes that result in different contexts and in different ways.

**Use an analogy to an air traffic control system to expand the public’s conception of what constitutes social–emotional skills.** The public defaults to a short list of social and emotional skills, focusing primarily on children’s abilities to comply and to communicate. A metaphor that likens self-regulation skills to the “air traffic control system of the brain” channels attention to the capacity to manage and regulate various kinds of input.17 The *Brain Air Traffic Control System* explanatory metaphor was designed to help translate the science of executive function, redirecting attention from behavior as a matter of character and compliance to the understanding that behavior involves capacities like inhibitory control, emotion regulation, working memory, and cognitive flexibility. The following is an example of the metaphor:

From the moment of birth, children’s brains are developing the cognitive, emotional, and social skills they will need to become healthy, functioning adults. One of these skill sets is called “executive function”—the ability to make decisions about focus, attention, and planning. These skills, which are essential throughout life, serve a similar function to the air
traffic control system at a busy airport. In the human brain, this air traffic control system helps us sort and regulate demands on our attention, focus on tasks, create priorities, avoid collisions, and keep the whole system functioning smoothly but flexibly. Just as the skills needed for air traffic control can be taught and trained, children can benefit from opportunities to practice and learn the skills needed to regulate their mental airspace.

Use the *Moral Muscle Memory* explanatory metaphor to explain the need for students to receive regular, guided practice in social, emotional, and academic skills. *Moral Muscle Memory* explains the process of behavioral development by comparing it to something the public already understands: the role of repetition and practice in developing automatic control over new physical skills, like riding a bike or playing an instrument. This analogy reframes behavior problems as learning opportunities and focuses the public’s attention on the role of support and regular, sustained time for practice (and failure) in the learning process. FrameWorks’ testing has found this frame to be effective in building public understanding of two different social–emotional approaches: empathy building and restorative justice in schools.  

How is the ability to get along with others in school like learning to ride a bike? Practice makes all the difference. The reason is muscle memory. Just like a near-fall on a bike lets kids learn how to rebalance, behavior issues in school present opportunities to learn social skills. If schools simply exclude students from class when problems occur, they’re missing opportunities to provide the kind of guidance that exercises kids’ “behavior muscles.” An alternative is for students to get the chance to practice and rehearse conflict resolution skills before problems occur, with adults and teachers actively coaching them, so that their moral muscle memory remembers these lessons when conflicts pop up. Schools that have taken this approach have seen fewer problems with student behavior, and the students themselves are building problem-solving muscles that will help them move through life more smoothly.

Use the *Ecosystem* explanatory metaphor to explain integrating SEAD. Experts argue that SEAD needs full integration and should not be considered another program or add-on. The *Ecosystem* explanatory metaphor (already in use in some parts of the education field) helps people understand the complementary roles that different sites and locations play in effective learning and education. By placing aspects of schooling that are familiar to people, such as classrooms, alongside other essential parts of the system, such as school climate or community organizations, the metaphor helps people see how SEAD needs to be integrated throughout the education system. The widespread understanding of ecosystems as interconnected networks supports reasoning about the integration of SEAD. This is a highly effective metaphor for communicating multiple aspects of integrating SEAD, as the following iteration shows:
Children learn in a complex ecosystem that includes the classroom, the school, the family, and the community. If we want to support effective development and learning, we need to build SEAD opportunities into all parts of the learning ecosystem. If children are embedded in an ecosystem that gives them exposure to and practice in using social, emotional, and academic skills, they are much more likely to acquire and apply these skills over the course of their academic and non-academic lives.

When talking about systemic or structural changes to the education system, compare the process to the remodeling of a valuable but outdated house. Shifting to SEAD will require changes to the US education system—and talking about change is something that must always be framed carefully. If not, the public may react defensively or infer that the scale of change needed is impossible or too disruptive to be worth it. Of the explanatory metaphors that FrameWorks tested for communicating about education reform, Remodeling consistently and reliably was found to expand public understanding of why the education system needs to be updated and how we can do it effectively, as the following iteration shows:

The changes we need to make to our education system are like remodeling a valuable but outdated house—keeping what works and updating what doesn’t to make it more functional for today’s needs.

This metaphor communicates both the need for substantive change and the feasibility of success—while at the same time steering the conversation away from alternatives that are more about razing or neglecting the system. In particular, it sets up a conversation about plans for remodeling, allowing spokespeople to extend the metaphor and offer clear examples of the updates that integrating SEAD will entail. The remodeling domain also allows space to acknowledge the discomfort that comes with change: We can expect a bit of dust and noise, but this is temporary, and—in the end—well worth it.

Communications Strategies to Avoid

Some ways of framing an issue can ensnare public thinking in unproductive evaluations and judgments. These communications “traps” are sometimes commonly employed techniques in a field because they represent logical ways to respond to challenges that communicators have observed from experience. However, framing research shows that these practices fail to achieve desired effects or even turn out to do more harm than good. FrameWorks research on public thinking about SEAD suggests that communicators need to be wary of the following traps.
Avoid language that might inadvertently reinforce the distinction between social, emotional, and academic skills. Communicators may be tempted to argue for integrating SEAD because of its positive effects on academic outcomes. A narrow focus on academic performance, however, may work against the expert perspective on the fundamentally intertwined nature of these skills. This is likely to reinforce the public’s dominant view that social, emotional, and academic skills are discrete and are thus related in a zero-sum way. Focusing on academic outcomes of integrating SEAD may also obscure the social and collective importance of integrating SEAD by strengthening the belief that the primary purpose of a well-functioning educational system is to ensure individual academic achievement and financial success later in life. Instead, we recommend explanatory examples that describe the ways in which positive SEAD works as an integration process, and connect integrating SEAD with a range of positive and collective outcomes.

Avoid talk about a “broken” or dysfunctional education system. One strategy regularly used in calls for changes to the education system is to explain how poorly schools are functioning, to discuss how they are failing our children, and to emphasize the “brokenness” of the system. Rather than increase public engagement with proposed changes, talking about the “brokenness” of a system fuels the public’s sense of pessimism about the possibility of change and skepticism that any proposal will in fact improve outcomes. Instead, use the Remodeling explanatory metaphor and describe how integrating SEAD will work and how it will improve outcomes at all levels of the education system.

Avoid triggering the Caring Teacher model. Integrating SEAD requires that all adults in a school environment be responsive to student needs. Experts argue that this is a skill—as opposed to an inherent character trait—that teachers and others can develop with the right supports and opportunities for professional development. However, without careful framing, the public may interpret messages about integrating SEAD as teachers just needing to “care” more about their students. Instead of tripping the trap of the caring teacher, focus on the need for support, training, and resources for teachers to take a more intentional approach to SEAD in their curricula, pedagogy, and classrooms.

Avoid invoking nostalgia. Counterintuitively, people tend to look nostalgically at their own educational experiences, which hardens their sentiment that to improve education, all we need to do is revert to the way we used to teach kids—an understanding that does not include a focus on social or emotional capabilities and mindsets.

Avoid using stories about an individual child. Individual stories reinforce public notions that educational outcomes are the simple and straightforward result of the amount of willpower exerted
by a given child. This strategy dampens people’s support for changes to contexts that support better SEAD. If all children need to do is try harder, why would we invest in context? Instead, communicators should tell systems-level stories—stories that position school systems and structures as the protagonists and antagonists—rather than episodic stories that use isolated examples of the trials and tribulations of individual children and families.

**Avoid fact-checking to debunk myths or misconceptions.** Myth-fact sheets are pervasive in communications materials, but social science research has demonstrated repeatedly that they are counterproductive. Although myth-fact approaches might seem like a good strategy for correcting misconceptions, they have a high likelihood of backfiring. Due to the way people process and recall information, repeating a misconception before introducing a correction paradoxically reinforces the misconception. Studies show that myth-fact sheets can lead to a decline in understanding and regressions in policy support. Rather than restating misconceptions or myths, communicators should make the affirmative case and advance the position that they want to communicate. Communicators should not spend valuable message real estate refuting an erroneous position. In situations where it is necessary to acknowledge a misconception or outmoded way of thinking, the affirmative case should always come first to set the frame and channel thinking toward the target perception.
Conclusion

As advocates for integrating SEAD engage more constituencies and stakeholders, it’s important to attend carefully to what distinguishes effective from ineffective outreach on this topic. Communications research offers solid evidence that some common ways of framing the issue are likely to decrease—rather than increase—public engagement and support. Translating the science, then, requires a scientific approach to communications, with hypotheses being subjected to testing and refinement.

The recommendations offered here were developed through a systematic analysis of where education messages are likely to go astray, and they use tested techniques and tools for reducing misunderstanding and promoting consideration of scientific insights. Familiar metaphors and values bring people into the conversation and remind them of what is important to consider as they weigh public options. Strategic framing fosters people’s ability to have robust conversations about SEAD and education in general as a public issue and to consider the effects and possibilities of the policies, structures, and systems that we have created and that we can change.
About the FrameWorks Institute

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the nonprofit sector’s communications capacity by framing the public discourse about social problems. Its work is based on Strategic Frame Analysis®, a multi-method, multidisciplinary approach to empirical research. FrameWorks designs, conducts, publishes, explains, and applies communications research to prepare nonprofit organizations to expand their constituency base, to build public will, and to further public understanding of specific social issues—the environment, government, race, children’s issues, and health care, among others. Its work is unique in its breadth—ranging from qualitative, quantitative, and experimental research to applied communications toolkits, eWorkshops, advertising campaigns, FrameChecks®, and in-depth FrameLab study engagements. In 2015, it was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Foundation’s Award for Creative and Effective Institutions. Learn more at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

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Endnotes


