Advocating for Students with Disabilities:
Strategic Framing Insights

By changing how we present ideas—reframing the issue—we can lead more productive, solutions-oriented conversations on misunderstood topics. This guide is designed to equip school leaders and advocates with communication strategies to promote classroom climates that fully and fairly include students with disabilities.

What is framing?

Framing is the process of making choices about what we say, how we say it, what we emphasize, and what we leave unsaid.

Framing matters because these choices shape how people think, feel, and act.

Framing affects whether we think an issue is important, whether we think of it as a private, personal problem or a shared social concern, and the kinds of solutions we support.

We are always framing—so we should always frame strategically, considering how our choices will affect both shorter- and longer-term goals.

Anticipating People's Assumptions

Pushback against inclusive, restorative classroom management tends to rely on patterned, predictable assumptions that are widely shared but hinder progress. The first step in strategic framing is to understand and anticipate these ways of thinking. This analysis equips you to make choices that will shift—not reinforce—common, default assumptions:

- *Individualism*: Focusing solely on individual responsibility, neglecting systemic factors
- *Otherism*: Believing that disabilities make children less capable or more dangerous than other children
- *Zero-Sum Thinking*: Assuming that if schools take steps that benefit children with disabilities, children without disabilities will be shortchanged
- *Rational Actor*: Assuming that people, including children, logically select their behaviors and responses after carefully weighing options, drawbacks, and benefits
- *Violence Threshold*: Assuming that there is a sharp distinction between nonviolent and violent behaviors and believing that actions that cross the threshold of violence are especially significant, wrong, and deserving of punishment

— *Fatalism*: Believing that change is impossible or that children's destinies are predetermined.

By remembering that people will typically filter advocacy and communication messages through these mindsets, we can anticipate how messages will be heard. Preparing in this way gives education leaders and advocates a chance to choose themes, words, and examples that avoid triggering these ways of thinking and contributing to these beliefs. Also, in certain contexts—such as within a coalition—naming and recognizing these patterns can allow education leaders and advocates to develop more efficient and precise efforts to shift these ways of thinking.

Reframing Strategies

The strategies here offer specific ways to counter unproductive mindsets. By connecting the specific needs of children with disabilities to the needs that all students share, advocates and education leaders can counteract the "othering" of people with disabilities.

1. **Connect disability-specific needs to the conditions all students need to learn, develop, and thrive.** Lead with shared needs using phrases like "every young person needs." Then, explain how specific supports fulfill those needs for students with disabilities. Later in a communication, emphasize the collective benefits of inclusive practices. By reinforcing that all children share fundamental developmental processes, our framing can reduce and prevent othering of students with disabilities and reduce reliance on zero-sum thinking. Be clear that when we make schools safe and welcoming, everybody benefits. Inclusive schools aren't just beneficial for students with disabilities—they create safer and better learning environments for all kids.

Instead of focusing first on disabilities	Try leading with shared needs
"Disability is a type of diversity, and whether children with developmental disabilities or delays reach their potential is connected to how society responds to and nurtures them."	"As a community, we are dedicated to making sure all children have the support they need to reach their potential. Children with disabilities need a range of specific supports to realize that potential."

2. **Focus on flawed systems and policies, not "bad actors."** When discussing challenges in education, highlight bad policies and processes, rather than focusing on an individual "villain," like an educator or security officer who mishandled a situation. Zoom out to show how specific policies or practices are uneven, unfair, and harmful. Start with a policy condition—such as inadequate resources, lack of training, or flawed policies—that sets a chain of events in motion that ends with negative and unfair outcomes for students with disabilities, as in the examples here. Go for understanding of causes and consequences, not outrage at absurdity or cruelty.

Policy Condition	Process	Negative Outcome
Schools may not have the resources to train educators and educational support staff in de-escalation methods.	Without chances to learn or practice these skills, support staff may resort to restraint or isolation.	These approaches are harmful to all involved, often sparking cycles of fear, anger, and conflict.

Policy Condition	Process	Negative Outcome
Overcrowded schools may mean that students experiencing a stress response don't have support from an adult or scaffolding to practice calming strategies.	This makes it difficult for some students to self-regulate, which may result in disruptive behavior.	Lack of time and space can make it more likely that staff resort to harmful, exclusionary approaches, which can have long-term negative consequences.

3. **Unpack the chain of events that unfolds when children are isolated or restrained.** Explanation is key to helping education system leaders, educators, families, and other audiences understand why exclusionary and punitive approaches are harmful, and to building consensus for restorative, inclusive approaches. This is especially true when it comes to advocating against isolation, as people may see it as the absence of action or conclude that time alone, in some circumstances, can be helpful. To build better explanations, start with a shared need, show how a harmful practice denies or thwarts that need, and then clearly state the longer-term harm that results. Put another way: show what affects what, to what end.

Shared Need	Process	Negative Outcome
Children need adults to model and support them through self-regulation strategies as they learn to manage stress responses and strong emotions.	When children are isolated in a room by themselves, they lack the support of a trusted adult to guide them through strategies to calm down.	Isolation will increase negative and disruptive behavior because children will lose trust and see adults as threats rather than sources of support.

4. Speak directly to how implicit racial bias can compound the challenges children with disabilities face when it comes to classroom management.

Advocates for more inclusive and just school climates face a major communications hurdle: Most people don't fully understand how race and racism cause unfair differences in school experiences. Simply naming the issue doesn't do enough, because people often reduce the concept of racism to individual acts of obvious discrimination. While that's where people start, it isn't where they have to end up. FrameWorks Institute researchers found that good explanations of implicit bias led audiences to:

- Recognize how racial disparities happen in schools; oppose exclusionary disciplinary actions
- Prefer methods that focus on repairing harm and relationships
- Understand that classroom management practices can have serious negative repercussions, such as unfair involvement in the youth legal system.

See below for an example of the type of explanation that led to these powerful frame effects. Note that this sample explanation starts with external sources of implicit bias and doesn't single out educators—an approach that can reduce the likelihood that education system leaders react defensively.

Shared processes	Problem	Solutions
Our brains have hidden biases that cause us to make quick judgments, often influenced by media and culture. These implicit biases can cause anyone, including educators, to make quick, sometimes inaccurate judgments. These biases can lead educators to perceive the behavior of Black students more negatively than that of white students, even when the actions are the same. Consequently, Black students often face harsher and more frequent punishments in schools.	All this adds up to a problematic and impractical situation: Even when Black students are not behaving differently, they are treated differently. National data shows that African American students are 3.5 times more likely to be expelled than white students. Data also shows that boys are more likely to be punished than girls, and students with disabilities are more likely to be punished than their peers. Implicit bias plays a role in all these trends.	Punitive approaches take away opportunities for children to learn. However, when educators learn to recognize their implicit biases, they are less likely to make snap judgments about students' behavior. This training can lead schools to rethink their classroom management policies, reduce suspensions, and adopt fairer and more effective approaches. Addressing hidden bias in school policies and practices is crucial for ensuring all students are treated fairly.

5. **Help people see that another way is possible.** Don't just dwell on the problems: Help people visualize and understand how alternative, more inclusive practices work. FrameWorks research shows that unless advocates offer a feasible alternative, people generally support allowing schools and teachers the option to isolate, suspend, or expel students. On the other hand, the same study showed that when the public is informed about both the underlying problems with exclusionary discipline practices and the potential of effective alternatives, they are much more likely to support changes to school discipline policies. By offering concrete, compelling examples of what's possible, our framing can reduce fatalism and build motivation for change.

For instance, if your aim is to build support for restorative practices, don't stop after pointing out the problems with punishment. Keep going and offer people two possible futures: one with the shared consequences of a harmful and unfair approach and the other with the benefits of a practical and hopeful alternative.

Use simple, relatable language to explain how alternatives work. Talk about specific strategies like co-teaching models or accessible curriculum design instead of general statements about inclusion. Or focus on how restorative approaches build children's abilities to self-regulate and take accountability.

See below for an example that shows how to include solutions in the picture. Instead of starting and ending with a critique of the existing system, contrast harmful practices with better possibilities.

Instead of only saying, "we're doing it wrong	Keep going to show what we can do instead
When schools rely on classroom management approaches that exclude or punish students for unwanted behavior, it often makes problems worse, not better. For instance, suspending a student can trigger a negative cycle. The suspension itself may cause a student to feel angry, resentful, or afraid. When the student returns, they've missed out on lessons and may feel confused, ashamed, or frustrated. They may act out as a result—leading to another suspension and greater disengagement.	There's a different way: the restorative approach, which engages students in thinking about how to take responsibility after a problem occurs, especially if they have caused harm. The aim is to help students understand the impact of their actions and work together to make things right. If the situation is handled well, students learn from difficult situations, develop a sense of trust and connection with school adults, and stay engaged in learning and growing.

6. **Use explanatory stories, not sensational ones.** Stories are powerful because they are more memorable, emotionally engaging, and can help us imagine the world from a different perspective. A story that inadvertently reinforces unproductive mindsets or harmful narratives, however, can channel this power toward unwanted ends. An event that a storyteller offers as an example of mistreatment of a child with a disability may be interpreted by others as a necessary response to a dangerous and chaotic situation caused by the child. This predictable type of disconnect means advocates must strategically develop and share stories that highlight the responsibility of systems without alienating potential allies or others who are essential for creating change.

You can see the difference in these two versions of an authentic story told by a parent of a child with a disability.

Before: **Without anticipating public mindsets**	**After:** **Reframed to navigate negative assumptions**
My daughter was struggling to keep up with a math lesson and became very frustrated. Her teacher tried to explain to her why she needed to calm down, which only made her more frustrated. She started hitting herself because she felt so inadequate. The teacher called behavioral support staff to remove her from the room. At this point, she was so upset that she fought the staff as they dragged her out of the room and locked her in a room by herself. Exclusion from the classroom and isolation solved "the problem" for the adults, but didn't do a thing for my daughter.	Because of her learning differences, my daughter often struggles to keep up with math lessons. It would be so helpful if teachers had strategies to help her manage frustration, rather than just telling her to be calm. If she had a way to signal that she needed to move to a quiet space to calm herself, she would be able to reset and return to the classroom. Unfortunately, these processes weren't in place the day my daughter was experiencing lots of frustration. She was restrained and isolated, which caused her harm, was hard for staff and other students to witness, and undermined the sense that everyone belongs in the classroom.

Concluding Thoughts

Not everyone is aware that there are effective alternatives to traditional, punitive school discipline techniques. This lack of awareness makes it unlikely they'll understand the connections between approaches to school climate and the needs and rights of students with disabilities.

To advance fair and inclusive schools, education leaders and advocates must discuss the harm that punitive and exclusionary approaches inflict. However, if not carefully worded, outreach and education could inadvertently reinforce biases and harmful assumptions.

On the other hand, with the right framing, outreach and advocacy can more effectively mobilize affected communities, generate support among bystander publics, and persuade education system leaders to act. In this way, reframing is a way of resisting harmful narratives and beliefs about students with disabilities.

You can learn more in Reframing School Discipline: A Strategic Communications Playbook.

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