

# COMMUNICATING ABOUT STUDENT MOTIVATION

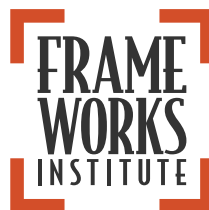
## Challenges, Opportunities, and Emerging Recommendations

A FrameWorks Strategic Brief

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In partnership with the  
Mindset Scholars Network

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# Introduction

Communicating about student motivation can easily go awry. There are a number of potential barriers to being heard and understood. Both the public and educators have multiple, deeply held ways of thinking about motivation and learning. Some of these existing ways of thinking make it harder for communicators to get their points across, while others make it easier.

This strategic brief identifies challenges and opportunities posed by these existing ways of thinking. In each case, we offer strategies for navigating these ways of thinking, providing recommendations about how to address challenges and take advantage of opportunities.

The brief is grounded in research conducted by the FrameWorks Institute, in partnership with the Mindset Scholars Network, to survey the terrain of expert, public, and professional thinking about student motivation.\* This research is part of a broader project to develop a comprehensive *core story of student motivation* to effectively communicate about this issue. Further research will be needed to build on the recommendations offered here and to identify the most effective ways of framing the issue.

\* A fuller description of the data and methods behind this research is available as a supplement to this brief.

# What Are We Trying to Communicate?

To develop an effective strategy for communicating about student motivation, it's necessary to identify a set of key ideas to get across. To do this, FrameWorks researchers conducted interviews and feedback sessions with experts in the field, and reviewed relevant literature across the disciplines of neurobiology, social psychology, educational psychology, sociology, and economics. Below, we summarize the key ideas that emerged from this process, which represent the core points that need to be effectively communicated and the solutions for which experts want to build support for through communications.\*

## WHAT IS STUDENT MOTIVATION?

- Motivation is a psychological process that drives learning and behavior.
- Student motivation is about students feeling energized to learn and is necessary to become engaged in school.
- Student motivation is a product of both the student *and the learning environment*.
- Student motivation is highly malleable and varies according to age, developmental stage, and relational and cultural context.

\* A fuller description of this “untranslated story” and of the research conducted to identify it is available as a supplement to this brief.

## WHAT ARE THE FACTORS THAT SUPPORT STUDENT MOTIVATION?

- An educational environment that fosters a sense of belonging and purpose around learning that is shared by and evident to everyone who is part of the school community, including students, educators, administrators, staff, families, and the wider community.
- Trusting relationships within the school, family, and community that make students feel valued, cared for, and understood.
- Curriculum and instruction that are meaningful and purposeful to students, and empower them in the learning process.
- Feedback and assessment practices that focus on student effort and learning practices (e.g., “You worked really hard on that math quiz!”), rather than suggesting students have a fixed level of ability (e.g., “You’re good at math!”).

## WHAT ARE THE FACTORS THAT UNDERMINE STUDENT MOTIVATION?

- A school environment that is psychologically and physically unsafe.
- A school environment that does not reflect the breadth of cultures in our society.
- A school environment that focuses on comparisons between students.
- Students’ experiences of bias, discrimination, and stereotyping.
- Students’ experiences of structural inequalities and under-resourced schools.

## WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF STUDENT MOTIVATION?

- Feeling more motivated and supported in school helps to improve students’ academic achievement and mastery of skills and subject matter.
- When students feel more motivated and supported in school, they are more likely to experience long-term success and wellbeing.
- Supporting student motivation has important societal benefits, including the possibility of increased civic skills and capacity, and economic productivity.

## WHAT SHOULD BE DONE TO SUPPORT STUDENT MOTIVATION?

- Address systemic and structural sources of disadvantage, oppression, and exclusion experienced by students.
- Strengthen schools' relationships with families and communities.
- Incorporate inclusive practices and policies into all aspects of the school environment (e.g., eliminating metal detectors, promoting performances, presentations, art, etc. that reflect the diversity of the student body, and diversifying the teaching workforce to reflect the diversity of the student population and society).
- Adopt curricula and forms of classroom instruction that nurture student motivation (e.g., less reliance on high stakes testing, feedback that praises effort and skill, curricula that reflect students' perspectives, experiences, and backgrounds).
- Improve and expand professional learning and training on how best to support student motivation, and increase resources to support educators, staff, and schools.

# Challenges and Opportunities

To understand how members of the public and professional educators think about student motivation, FrameWorks researchers conducted 35 interviews: 10 interviews with 6th–12th grade educators, 10 interviews with postsecondary educators, and 15 interviews with members of the public. Interviews were conducted in Houston, Texas; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and Baltimore, Maryland. A diverse sample of participants was recruited, with variation along several key dimensions, including socioeconomic status and race and ethnicity, and, in the case of educators, variation in professional background and educational institution (e.g., number of years in the profession and the socioeconomic composition of the student body at their institution). These interviews were analyzed to identify the deep, implicit ways of thinking that these groups use to think about student motivation. This analysis was supplemented with a secondary analysis of FrameWorks’ past research on public thinking about education. This research yields an understanding of existing ways of thinking about student motivation among the general public and educators.

It is crucial to center power in our analysis of these shared ways of thinking. As part of our culture, these tacit, taken-for-granted patterns of thinking grow out of a history structured by systems of domination and oppression. While our analysis does not trace the roots of the specific ways of thinking discussed, it does attend to the ways in which dominant ways of thinking perpetuate existing inequities, as well as how some available ways of thinking—more promisingly—offer a basis for problematizing and contesting unjust aspects of the existing social order.

Based on this research, we can identify both challenges and opportunities that communicators face in getting across the key ideas outlined above. As the discussion below notes, some of these challenges and opportunities apply to both the public and educators, while others apply only to one group or the other. We offer general recommendations about how to respond to the challenges and leverage the opportunities, with a couple of important caveats: further research is needed to identify specific framing strategies that work; and communicators must keep in mind that these general recommendations must be adapted to specific audiences and contexts and that different recommendations will be more or less relevant depending on the group addressed.

## CHALLENGES

### Challenge #1: Both members of the public and educators often understand student motivation as a personal trait or choice.

There is a strong tendency among members of the public and educators alike to individualize student motivation. They understand student motivation to be either an innate trait or disposition, or an individual choice. People naturally have different goals and interests, and whether or not a student is motivated is ultimately up to each student. Students have to decide for themselves whether or not they want to learn and do well at school, and no one can make that decision for them.

#### How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* to get key points across:

The idea that motivation is a personal trait or choice generates a sense of fatalism. If motivation comes down to being naturally interested in or personally choosing to learn and do well at school, there's not much that can be done about unmotivated students. Some students just can't be motivated, and the whole enterprise of fostering student motivation can seem unnecessary or futile.

Moreover, this idea makes it harder for people to see how environmental and structural factors shape student motivation. If motivation is assumed to ultimately depend on individual students, then factors like larger social structures, school climate, curricula, and practices seem less important.

How to address this challenge:

**AVOID** focusing on students' decisions or traits. Language that centers on personal traits or choices will make it harder for people to see how we can collectively support student motivation.

**FOREGROUND** and **EXPLAIN** how institutional and structural factors shape student motivation. Emphasize programs, policies, culture, and physical space—elements that shape student motivation across and beyond individual students.

### Challenge #2: Both members of the public and educators assume that students are primarily motivated by rewards or incentives.

Members of the public and educators frequently think of school as a place kids go because they have to, not because they want to. In turn, they think about school in instrumental terms, assuming that students are only motivated to learn and



do well at school when it yields personal benefits or tangible rewards. People think the best way to motivate students is to provide them with rewards and incentives for learning and doing well at school in the short or long term (e.g., permission to play or go out with friends, money for a good grade or doing homework, scholarships), or to educate them about the long-term benefits of education (e.g. getting a good or better-paying job) or the costs of a lack of education.

**How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* to get key points across:**

While the tangible student outcomes related to school are certainly important, instrumental thinking of this sort makes it harder for people to understand the importance of intrinsic satisfaction and engagement in learning, and how changes to the process of learning itself might support student motivation. When thinking in this way, people are less likely to recognize that motivation can be fostered by giving students opportunities to express themselves, or by designing curricula and instruction that are attuned to the breadth of students' cultural backgrounds and foster a sense of belonging for all students.

How to address this challenge:

**AVOID** emphasizing rewards and incentives. This is likely to reinforce cramped instrumental thinking about how to promote motivation.

**EXPAND** thinking about motivation by highlighting sources of motivation intrinsic to the learning process. Emphasizing how schools can motivate and engage students by fostering a sense of belonging, enjoyment, and involvement in the learning process will bring into view a wider range of ways that schools can promote motivation.

**Challenge #3: Members of the public and educators alike assume that student motivation develops mostly at younger ages, and becomes more fixed over time.**

Members of the public and educators often assume that people's motivation to learn and do well at school is formed during early childhood. As students get older, their motivation to learn and do well at school is thought to be largely set and less sensitive to external influence. This means that there is little that can or should be done to foster motivation as students get closer to adulthood, and especially by the time they reach postsecondary education. Critically, this way of thinking is also shared by many postsecondary educators.

**How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* to get key points across:**

Thinking in this way makes it harder for people to see why supporting motivation among older students is necessary, and obscures how practices and policies can support motivation among older students. By this way of thinking, when older students aren't motivated and engaged in school, it's either too difficult to do anything about it or up to students themselves to fix.

How to address this challenge:

**EMPHASIZE** how motivation varies across time depending on circumstances. Highlighting the fluidity of motivation is important to counter fatalism about motivating students as they get older.

**FOREGROUND** and **EXPLAIN** the role of environments and social structures in shaping student motivation. Explaining how motivation at school depends on environmental and structural factors is critical to counter the idea that it is developed and increasingly intractable after early childhood.

**PROVIDE** examples of ways to create conditions that motivate older students. Concrete examples that illustrate how older students can be motivated will help to build understanding that there *are* steps that can make a difference with students of all ages.

**Challenge #4: Members of the public and educators alike focus on some types of relationships while missing others, and don't understand how supportive relationships can be systematically promoted.**

People recognize that positive relationships are essential to motivating students, but their thinking on relationships is limited in two key ways. First, people focus almost solely on relationships between students and families or students and teachers. In turn, they largely don't think at all about relationships between families and schools, much less relationships between these groups and the broader community. Second, they generally see relationships as a reflection of personal qualities—specifically, whether or not people *care*. People assume that as long as teachers and parents care enough, this suffices for strong relationships to grow.

**How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* to get key points across:**

The tendency not to recognize the importance of relationships between families and schools, or the value of community engagement more broadly, limits understanding of *which* relationships can foster student motivation. Moreover, the assumption that relationships are all about the personal characteristics of people makes it impossible to see how relationships can be supported by systems. How much people care is assumed to be a feature of people themselves, not something that can be advanced

through policy, programmatic, or structural changes. Put simply, people think that relationships matter for motivation, but treat them as an interpersonal issue, not a systemic one.

How to address this challenge:

**EXPLAIN** how institutional practices and resources can facilitate or undermine relationships between students, families, schools, and communities. Drawing explicit connections between institutional practices and resources on the one hand, and trusting, supportive relationships on the other is critical to bringing the role of systems more clearly into view.

**USE** examples to highlight how relationships between students' families, schools, and communities shape student motivation. For example, explaining how ongoing family engagement builds trust between families and schools and, in turn, supports student motivation can not only bring these relationships into view but also help people see how they can support motivation.

### **Challenge #5: Members of the public, and white people, in particular, frequently ignore or misunderstand how inequity, marginalization, and minoritization affect student motivation.**

Members of the public often assume that factors like socioeconomic status, gender, and especially race and ethnicity play little to no role in student motivation. White people in particular tend to downplay the role of race and ethnicity.

When people do draw a link between student motivation and factors like socioeconomic status, gender, or race and ethnicity, they sometimes believe that discrimination or marginalization motivates students by giving them a reason to learn and do well at school. Overcoming challenges is thought to motivate students by instilling a sense of purpose (i.e., a desire to prove others wrong, or improve one's circumstances). These patterns of thinking are much less prominent among educators than among the public.

#### **How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* to get key points across:**

These ways of thinking about discrimination and marginalization obscure the need to address these issues through structural or systemic change. When people think in these ways, they assume that these issues are either not a problem or can be overcome by the personal efforts of students, families, and teachers and school administrators.

How to address this challenge:

**PROVIDE** concrete examples of how inequity, marginalization, and minoritization undermine student motivation. While further research is needed to identify the best ways of explaining this, examples are almost certainly needed to concretize both the problem and appropriate solutions for people.

**BE CAREFUL** when telling stories of inequity and discrimination about individuals. While personal stories can be powerful, they are also often easily misinterpreted or explained away as the exception to the rule. Make sure to explain how environmental and structural factors shape student achievement and provide examples that encompass a diversity of people and places.

### **Challenge #6: Both members of the public and educators generally assume that differences in student motivation are due to family and group-based values and norms.**

Members of the public and educators often assume that differences in students' motivation stem from the values and norms of the groups to which students belong, namely their families, friends, and communities. When students feel less motivated to learn and do well at school, this is thought to be because their families, friends, or communities must not expect or care about learning and doing well at school.

People often assume that students from some socioeconomic or racial and ethnic groups are more motivated than students from others, and they explain these purported differences by appealing to group culture. In particular, they often think that students from families and communities facing economic disadvantage, especially those who are Black, are surrounded by people who are less concerned with education and engaged in violent or criminal behaviors, and they frequently think that students who are Asian come from families and communities who care a great deal. In turn, they assume that students facing socioeconomic disadvantage are less motivated to learn and do well at school, while Asian students are more motivated.

#### **How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* to get key points across:**

This way of thinking is rooted in and reinforces racialized and class-based narratives and stereotypes about the supposed values, expectations, and abilities of different groups in US society, and obscures how systemic factors shape learning and student motivation. It leads to racist and classist thinking that student motivation can be best supported by teachers or other adults mentoring and instilling “proper values” into certain students or their families and communities. This makes it impossible to recognize the need for structural and systemic changes

to society and schools (e.g., disrupting racialized and class-based narratives and sources of oppression and exclusion, increased investment in schools and communities that face economic disadvantage and have been discriminated against, changing evaluative standards, and designing curricula that reflect and engage all students' backgrounds and perspectives).

How to address this challenge:

**BE CAREFUL** when discussing students' values. Mentions of values may accidentally trigger the idea that student motivation is a function of whether families and groups value education or not and, in turn, activate racialized and class-based narratives and stereotypes.

**EMPHASIZE** systemic factors when explaining the role of socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity in student motivation. Focusing on educational resources and the environments is likely to foster a more structural understanding of the issue and to background problematic "culture of poverty" thinking.

### **Challenge #7: Educators are highly wary of government and administrative impositions, and the public shares this concern to a significant extent.**

Members of the public and educators both tend to assume that policies imposed by school administrators and policymakers are more likely to hurt than help student motivation. When thinking about policy, people's thinking goes quickly to standardized testing requirements in K-12 education, which are widely understood to be harmful to student learning. The unhelpfulness of interventionist policy is attributed to administrators and government officials being detached from the day-to-day realities of working in the classroom and students' lives, as well as concern about elections, ideological or personal beliefs, or money and power. While both the general public and educators at all levels displayed this type of thinking, 6th–12th grade educators spoke more viscerally about the experience of feeling burdened by misguided policies and expressed initiative fatigue.

#### **How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* to get key points across:**

While it is, of course, true that some policies are harmful rather than helpful, the blanket suspicion of educators and the public toward administrative or government efforts is a barrier to support for structural or systemic changes to institutions and practices that *are* needed to support student motivation. The idea that policies, programs, and practices should be left up to individual institutions or educators stands in direct opposition to many of the broader changes that are needed to promote student motivation in a meaningful

and equitable way. This way of thinking can also prevent educator support for professional learning by making it seem like yet another burden or requirement being imposed on educators by outsiders.

How to address this challenge:

**FRAME** professional learning, training, and other policies as a resource or form of support for educators, especially when communicating with educators. Foregrounding how policies help educators will likely undercut the sense that they are a burden.

**AVOID** the language of “requirements” when communicating with educators. Casting policies as requirements is likely to elicit opposition.

**EMPHASIZE** how policies respond to the needs and requests of educators. When policies have been developed in conversation with educators and in response to their needs, this should be foregrounded.

## OPPORTUNITIES

### Opportunity #1: Members of the public—especially educators—recognize that enjoyment and active involvement in the learning process are essential to student motivation.

While the public and educators tend to think about motivation in instrumental terms, both groups also recognize it as a sense of enthusiasm and excitement that can be generated by enjoyment and engagement in learning itself. When thinking in this way, they recognize that students’ enjoyment of learning—and, in turn, their motivation—is connected to students’ emotional state and as such, also sensitive to a wider range of factors, both inside and outside of school. Most importantly, they think that student motivation can be supported by providing students with more opportunities to participate in or guide the learning process.

#### How this pattern of thinking makes it *easier* to get key points across:

This way of thinking enables people to recognize the complexity of motivation and the importance of the learning process. It brings into view students’ *experience* of the learning process and makes it possible for people to see how practices that make students feel welcome and included can build motivation. In doing so, this type of thinking also helps combat fatalism by helping people see that motivation is sensitive to external factors and therefore changeable.

How to take advantage of this opportunity:

**PROVIDE** examples of practices that promote enjoyment and active engagement in the classroom. Discussing these practices is likely to cue and expand people's recognition of how environments can be created to foster motivation.

**USE** language that conveys students' emotions and lived experiences. Bringing the emotional aspect of learning into view is likely to shift people away from a purely rewards-based understanding of how to support student motivation and toward a more holistic understanding.

### **Opportunity #2: There is widespread recognition among both members of the public and educators that student motivation matters for society.**

People recognize that education has social benefits and believe that school does and should enable people to develop skills and knowledge that allow them to positively contribute to society. And because people recognize that motivation matters for learning, they have no difficulty seeing that student motivation has consequences for society as a whole.

**How this pattern of thinking makes it *easier* to get key points across:**

Thinking about the broader societal purpose and benefits of education moves people toward a more collective understanding of student motivation. This way of thinking encourages an understanding of student motivation as an issue that affects everyone and, to the extent it can be promoted, society as a whole should take steps to do so.

How to take advantage of this opportunity:

**EMPHASIZE** the broader benefits of education and supporting student motivation. Talking about these can help expand understanding of who can shape and support student motivation and, coupled with strategies to explain how student motivation can be supported, can help build support for more collective or systemic forms of action.

### **Opportunity #3: Educators and, to a lesser extent, members of the public can see how inclusive practices support student motivation.**

Educators and members of the public sometimes think of school as a second home, or a safe haven. They believe that schools are a place where students should feel safe, able to be themselves, and cared for and loved. When thinking in this way,

they are able to recognize how inclusive practices at school, including making sure the diversity of the student body is represented in the school environment, build a sense of belonging and, in turn, motivation. More than members of the public, educators recognize the many different factors that affect whether or not a school creates an inclusive, welcoming environment, including the physical features of a school; students' relationships with teachers, administrators, and school staff; curricula; teaching and administrative practices; and evaluative criteria.

#### How this pattern of thinking makes it *easier* to get key points across:

Conceiving of school as a second home helps bring into view the school environment—particularly the importance of practices that promote inclusion and student affirmation. Educators' more expansive thinking about what it takes to create an inclusive environment encourages greater support for a range of steps to support student motivation, including providing teacher and administrative professional learning; addressing the physical infrastructure of schools; putting in place evaluative standards that promote growth, rather than comparison and competition; and fostering warm relationships between students, families, and schools.

How to take advantage of this opportunity:

**CONNECT** the school climate and environment to students' sense of security and care. Linking school environment to student's emotional experience is a way of activating and leveraging the thinking about school as a second home.

**BE EXPLICIT** that schools should be welcoming and inclusive. This language is likely to cue productive thinking about belonging.

**PROVIDE** examples of inclusive practices for members of the public. This will help to expand thinking about how inclusive environments promote motivation and concretize thinking that is often too thin or vague.

#### **Opportunity #4: Educators, especially postsecondary educators, recognize that stereotypes and narratives about minoritized groups negatively affect student motivation.**

Although many people ignore or misunderstand inequity, marginalization, and minoritization, educators and postsecondary educators are much more attuned than members of the public to the idea that teachers and others in society can hold stereotypes about and exhibit psychological biases that harm certain students, particularly students who are Black, and/or girls and women. They understand that racialized and gendered narratives and stereotypes can lead educators and society more generally to expect different things of students from different racial



and ethnic groups and different genders, or treat them differently (e.g., expecting boys and men to enjoy or do better in mathematics, while expecting girls and women to enjoy or do better in language and literacy, or disciplining students of different genders and racial and ethnic groups more or less harshly). And, in contrast to public thinking that this kind of discrimination can effectively prompt motivation, educators recognize that it more often prevents students from feeling welcome and included and, in turn, from feeling motivated.

#### How this pattern of thinking makes it *easier* to get key points across:

Educators' understanding of the continued existence and role of stereotypes and narratives about minoritized groups in the learning process encourages them to support programs to help them learn how to address potential biases. In addition, the recognition of discrimination within education potentially opens space for other systemic steps to address inequities in education. Postsecondary educators in particular often see diversifying and incorporating the perspectives of members of historically marginalized groups into curricula as a way to combat exclusion, and foster a sense of belonging and motivation.

How to take advantage of this opportunity:

**EXPLAIN** how institutional norms and key features of the institutional environment can reinforce biases. When thinking about bias, educators' focus is usually on interpersonal interactions between students and teachers, and the personal beliefs of educators. Explaining how the education system reinforces these beliefs and dynamics, as well as exclusion through things such as evaluative criteria of students, teachers, and schools, and curriculum design, is a way of further extending this productive existing understanding.

#### **Opportunity #5: There is broad recognition among both educators and members of the public that the economic resources of students' families and schools affect students' motivation.**

Educators and members of the public understand basic resources to be essential for students to be motivated to learn and do well at school. They recognize that students must be well-fed, have clean water, be physically comfortable, and have basic educational tools, like textbooks, pencils and paper, among other things. Importantly, people understand that students' access to basic life and educational resources is shaped by socioeconomic status. They recognize that families with fewer socioeconomic resources—and the schools that serve their children—are less able to provide important basic resources.

**How this pattern of thinking makes it *easier* to get key points across:**

When the role of resources is salient in people's thinking, this shifts attention away from individual choices, inclinations, and values and orients people productively toward access to the material factors that shape motivation. This way of thinking enables people to see the need for greater public investment in the material needs of schools and communities facing economic disadvantage. This is a productive starting point, but it is worth noting that focusing on *basic* needs does not necessarily lead people to recognize what truly equitable forms of support look like or require.

How to take advantage of this opportunity:

**AVOID** talking about "basic" resources. Focusing on basic resources may limit support for addressing material resources to providing all schools with the same, necessary "minimum" of resources.

**EXPAND** and **EXPLAIN** the full range of ways that resources affect motivation. Explaining the various connections between material resources and motivation can leverage and expand the existing recognition that resources matter.

## ABOUT FRAMEWORKS

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multi-disciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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