

Minding Our Words: Making Our Best Case for California's Kids

Early Childhood Funders

ASO Communications

Introduction

Advocates in the arena of early childhood have been hard pressed to shape a narrative about what families need, what caretakers deserve and how state government ought to serve as a robust source of support. While gains in the form of transitional kindergarten, repeal of the Maximum Family Grant and public attention are encouraging, this has yet to translate to a coherent, broad strokes, reimagining of how our state ensures every kid in California has all they need.

Advocates concerned with the health and happiness of our communities must frame the conversation about how we ought to remake the rules about caring for our kids. And do so in ways that break down limiting notions of attending first — and, at times, exclusively — to economic growth.

This report highlights my examination of advocacy language in light of best practices and emerging public opinion research. This includes messages about the compensation for childcare providers and the evolving needs of the recipient population (parents, other caregivers and young children alike.)

The conclusions here are based on analysis of current language and recent available qualitative and quantitative research on these issues. The current language examined is made up of state advocates' written materials, opposition arguments to various policies you favor, media accounts and depictions of child development and parenting in the commercial sector. Further, it rests upon previous research exploring persuasion and motivation on various economic justice issues at the national level.

I begin here by exploring the elements of the basic frame, or storyline, you're conveying about the problems you're solving, solutions you're seeking and actions you're taking as advocates. Then, I move from the *what* of the story to the *why*: the various frames you use to make the case for action. Finally, I consider how the messages used to market products to caretakers of young kids could inform efforts to advocate on behalf of these same people.

Fair warning — this language analysis is heavier on diagnosis and lighter on cure. Wherever possible, however, I include suggestions for what to say instead.

Methodology

Using a variety of techniques from *cognitive linguistics*, a field dedicated to how people process information and communicate, I examine here how people formulate judgements and come to conclusions about economic and social issues.

Principally, the conclusions emerge from *metaphor analysis*. This involves cataloging commonplace non-literal phrases. Noting patterns in these phrases reveals how people automatically and unconsciously make sense of complexity. Each metaphor brings with it *entailments*, or a set of notions it highlights as “true” about a concept. Priming people with varying metaphors has been shown to alter not just how they speak but the ways they decide, unconsciously, what ought to be done about an issue. We judge a metaphor’s efficacy on how well it advances and amplifies what we wish the public got.

For example, researchers at Stanford showed that groups primed with a metaphor of CRIME AS DISEASE (*plaguing* our communities, *spreading* around) came up with entirely preventative solutions such as after school programs and preschool for all. Conversely, subjects exposed to CRIME AS OPPONENT (*fight* crime, *get tough on* crime) thought harsher punishments were the answer to handling crime. If you’re working for prevention, it’s clear you should liken crime to DISEASE and avoid OPPONENT language. A 3-strikes advocate would want to do the opposite.

What follows is an analysis of what your¹ words actually convey, especially focused on when this is at odds with what you intend audiences to understand.

What’s in the frame?

A principle entry point to examine how language shapes understanding and gives rise to a set of unconscious and, at times, unintended meanings, is exploration of *frame semantics*. A *frame*, in linguistics, acknowledges that words exist within and thus evoke pre-set packages of meaning, determined by our common knowledge, assumptions and beliefs. In short, words occur in contexts. As such, usage of even a single word brings with it a whole host of associated meanings, actors and objects that come into “view” whether or not the speaker desires.

Familiar ways of discussing most political issues including your own are an object lesson in the consequences of not attending to semantic frames. Here, I detail framing

¹ Throughout this document, I use “you” rather liberally to mean patterns of communication in frequent usage by grantees, allies or sympathetic media. Further, as examples illustrate common tendencies, I do not cite sources here in order to not cast aspersions on particular organizations or messengers.

challenges in key concepts including (1) origin of problems observed (2) effects problems have (3) naming desired solutions and (4) characterizing the role of advocates.

Who does what to whom?

Before you can hope to convince your constituencies, not to mention lawmakers, of the validity of your vision, they'd need to "get" your story about the sources of and solutions to the problems you describe. The origin story we rely upon intuitively conveys whether our proposed answers are the right ones. And whether the issue we're addressing is important enough to warrant attention and action. If we don't convince the patient of our diagnosis and the severity of the disease, why should we expect her to follow our treatment plan?

In this, we see a tendency to shield from view the actors who perpetrate the harms you catalogue.

Altering descriptions of events influence how audiences assess culpability and proposed remedies. In particular, varying verb forms between agentive (transitive) and non-agentive (intransitive) can have audiences change their judgments about real world events. In one experiment, using the infamous "wardrobe malfunction" during the Super Bowl Halftime Show in 2004, researchers found that respondents who read that a named agent (Justin Timberlake) "tore" another's (Janet Jackson) clothing attributed blame and sought to levy at least 30% more in indecency fines than those who read about the incident described as "the clothing was torn". This is especially telling because all the participants first watched video footage that clearly showed Timberlake ripping Jackson's clothing.

You are falling prey to the frequent progressive tendency of implying bad things just happen. The major obstacle you have in why many harms exist and persist, is your **frequent use of non-agentive constructions**. Here are representative examples, *followed one by one with example rewrites no longer in passive form*:

Children **do not have** access to the high quality early learning experiences they need and deserve. (*Lawmakers deny children the high quality early learning experiences they need and deserve.*)

Today, one million children **lack access** to the early learning that builds their brains and prepares them for success in K-12 learning and beyond. (*Today, we fail to provide one million children the early learning that builds their brains and prepares them for success in K-12 learning and beyond.*)

In the case of family child care, the problem is even worse **with providers significantly earning less** than the current minimum wage. Many providers and centers **are struggling** to stay open and maintain services because state reimbursement rates and revenue **have remained flat** while the minimum wage and related wage rates that staff and assistants earn increase. *(In the case of family child care, government choices leave providers paid less than the current minimum wage. This forces many providers and centers to close or cut back services because lawmakers have suppressed reimbursement rates, holding revenue down while operating costs rise.)*

[This county] **faces a critical shortage** of access to early childcare education that threatens to keep its neediest families in a cycle of poverty. *(County leaders decided not to create sufficient early childcare education slots holding the neediest families in poverty.)*

Efforts in California and other states to raise the quality of child care and preschool programs **are being undermined** by the low wages that workers earn in jobs that now require more skills and education. *(Lawmakers' choices to hold down pay for the providers who care for and educate our children directly undermine advocates' efforts in California and other states to bolster the quality of child care and preschool programs.)*

Disparities for poor children **begin to emerge** in this period, and quality early care helps reduce these developmental gaps. *(We begin to construct barriers to well-being in childhood by choosing to deny poor children the quality early care proven to move them out of poverty.)*

State and federal subsidies are designed to defray this expense for low-income families, but in California and across the country, **limited funds have shut** out many eligible kids. *(We designed state and federal subsidies to defray this expense for low-income families, but in California and across the country, lawmakers cut these funds and shut out many eligible kids.)*

In all of these examples, and the many others I could add, there is never a single villain, or even actor named. If rates have “failed to keep up” and bad things just happen, then what childcare providers and certain children are “experiencing” has no clear cause. And, it follows, no solution.

Even in places where you get more pointed about harms — you still don't name names:

Children's well-being is steadily declining because our **political system** is driven by the interplay and competition among interest groups.

Unfortunately, **California** is failing to meet the needs of all its children.

The state's **early childhood systems** do not uniformly provide or allocate high-quality services to all children effectively.

The discomfort with fingering a culprit leads to statements that are problematically incomplete. Consider the claim above that "California is failing to meet the needs of all its children." While entirely true, it doesn't indicate that this comes from deliberate choices by particular people.

Unless you convince your audiences that **people making intentional and at times nefarious decisions** are behind outcomes witnessed, you can't make the case that other outcomes are possible. If we do not insist that current problems are person-made we can't expect to prove our case that men and women, if so moved, could fix them.

Further, in not describing sources of harms, you leave open the option to blame the very people on the receiving end of bad policy choices. Consider who could be considered at fault in the following claims:

Attendance [in preschool] is especially critical for low-income children, who can arrive at elementary school nearly 14 months behind more affluent kids in school-readiness measures.

Our students are not getting a strong start when it matters most.

In California, millions of children face challenges that could put them at a disadvantage later in life.

As you know, it is all too easy for listeners to default to a blame the individual mode of thinking. Low-income parents, especially parents of color, bare the brunt of this tendency. Thus, when we say, for example, that "low-income children arrive at school behind," we can all but assume many people will attribute this to their parents.

The change you seek

It's not only in the description of the problem that your sentiments are largely de-peopled. Your "asks" are similarly passive. *Again, I offer an illustrative rewrite for each example:*

[We must] **do more** than we are currently doing. (*We must restore \$X by DATE.*)

[We should be] prioritizing a strong investment in early care and education. (*We should have early care and education available for every child in California from age X to Y.*)

Much **more can be done** to ensure that every child gets a high-quality education that prepares them for college, career and civic life. (*We have the means to provide a high-quality education for every child, we merely lack the will.*)

For our most vulnerable children, it is **important to bolster learning opportunities** beyond the early years into formal school through after-school and summer enrichment programs so they do not fall behind or suffer the devastating effects of summer learning loss. (*We must guarantee early learning opportunities...for our most vulnerable children.*)

Lawmakers are, no doubt, relieved to hear these admonitions. They contain no discernible timetables for completion, metrics of success or consequences for inaction.

Again, there are moments where you get closer to demanding outcomes, as these examples indicate:

We need to **end the funding drought** that has plagued nonprofit providers since the Great Recession.

[This] is an emerging alliance of child care providers, parents, clergy, community groups, progressive and civil rights organizations, elected leaders and employers uniting to press for comprehensive **reform of our broken system** of early learning and child care.

Saving early childhood education programs is the smartest choice **an elected official** can make.

These expressions, and the many others like them, give a better sense of what you're trying to see changed. And, as a bonus, the latter even conveys deliberate action ("choice") and responsible party ("elected official.") Unfortunately, the use a "saving" implies the previous programs were sufficient prior to recessionary cuts. In fact, they were inadequate before and only made worse through budget cuts.

Unnecessary hedging

Moving from the problems you seek to solve and solutions you desire, we come to descriptions of your own efforts. Hindering you from expressing yourselves clearly and persuasively is your tendency to insert *unnecessary hedge phrases*. Hedging, verbally distancing ourselves from the full weight of our assertions, is incredibly common.

Several phrases like “work to”, “dedicated to”, “strive to” serve this hedging function in progressive advocacy, for example:

We **work to ensure** educators and formal caregivers **have access to** the coaching and professional development they want and need, while **exploring how to reach** parents and informal caregivers with the information and resources that will help children succeed.

[The organization] is **designed to increase** the quality of early learning programs for children 0 to 5 by supporting the education and preparation of an effective, well-compensated and diverse early learning workforce.

[The] early childhood portfolio **seeks to address** child nutrition, child care, health care and early childhood education, ensuring that children grow up to lead healthy and productive lives

The program **works to invest** in high quality preschool programs that enhance the quality of care and education that children receive

Our promise is to continue to invest in services and programs that directly benefit children and families, and **to advocate for** a sustainable early education system for future generations.

[The organization] is **dedicated to improving** the lives of California’s young children and their families through a comprehensive system of education, health services, childcare, and other crucial programs

We **work to make sure** that every person who cares for a child is prepared to provide the best environment for them to learn and grow.

Our focus is to educate parents and caregivers about the important role they play in their children's first years.

These expressions beg the question — do you get things done or just try really hard? Further, “access to” leaves ambiguous whether the target population actually receives anything.

Happily, hedging is probably the easiest messaging issue to fix. Removing the verb before the infinitive in these common constructions does the trick. Thus, “work to ensure” becomes simply *we ensure* and “seeks to address” becomes *the early childhood portfolio addresses*, and so on.

To be sure, it may feel boastful or short sighted to take credit for actions that happen in broader coalitions and fights that are ongoing, not complete. However, unless you

convey to people you're the winning team — with tangible gains to show for it — they are unlikely to want to join the cause.

Defining (child)care

When advocating for improving access to and remuneration for *childcare*, it's fair for audiences to want to know what this is (and isn't.) This leads to the question — what do you mean by *(child)care*? What are the activities, actors and props on the scene?

Most frequently, you reference a metaphor of CHILDCARE AS OBJECT. It is common to refer to intangible concepts as concrete things and so it's unsurprising to find you doing so with CHILDCARE:

Having parents and **child care consumers** identify our issues, solutions, and courses of action

Child care is an **important component** to the development of young children and to the economic security of families.

This funding is greatly needed to **address the unmet need** of the children waiting to **receive** child care services.

Under the current system, quality affordable childcare is **out of reach** for too many parents.

Childcare is construed here as a thing you either “receive” or you don't, especially if it's “out of reach.” While this is an easy simplification, it takes away from the dynamic and organic process of care. And, more critically, it erases the providers all together. If childcare comes in a box you grab and open, there's no one doing anything. Further, although clearly some objects are of higher quality than others, they are generally considered static. We don't generally improve a thing that's prefabricated.

Further, you sometimes erase providers by making *childcare* itself an agent with its own needs and desires. For example, “child care will face harmful losses in our budget” and “child care keeps parents earning and children learning.” None of this care exists, of course, without people doing the work of it.

To bring providers back on the scene and thus enable conversation about compensation, respect and improving provision of care, it's helpful to step back and think about CARE. Care is both noun and verb. This flexibility of usage is a boon for generating messages.

Further, examining *care* in common usage, we see a range of potential meanings ascribed. Most frequently, care is used as give importance to, as in *I care about getting good grades*. The way you most often use it is attend to the needs of, as in "we **take care** of your children."

Care can also mean desire to, *would you care to discuss it*; resolve, *I'll take care of it*; attention to detail, *done with care*; and be responsible for, *place in your care*.

These meanings are positive for your purposes. You can likely get much more mileage out of *care* than you do now.

Employing these subtle shades on the meaning of care could provide you with messages like *let's take care in what we're deciding for our children/for our future*; [*x program/service*] *puts California in great care*; *child development done with care*; *have a care about tomorrow*.

From what to why

Turning now from the basic storyline to the reasons for action, we find a handful of commonly used frames. In arguing *why* we ought to increase expenditures and improve services for families with young children, you tend to rely foremost on cataloging collective future benefits — often in monetary terms.

For the economy

The approach most commonly offered for the slate of policies you favor centers on **economic benefits**. Making the economic case sounds like the following:

The case for **investing** in early childhood is strong. Child care plays two critical roles that **support our economy**.

We believe that **reinvesting** in child care is critical to ensure more families can work, remain contributing **taxpayers** and participate in California's **economic recovery**.

An **investment in our earliest learners is prudent**, keeps Californians working and **prevents costly academic interventions** and consequences later on.

Recent studies show that California's **job market will be facing a deficit** of over 1 million college graduates by 2030. The time to address that problem is right now and the way to do it is by investing in early education programs.

The **money that California invests** in our children today will be money that won't have to be spent tomorrow to deal with dropouts, unemployment, or mass incarceration.

Every dollar invested in high-quality early learning can **save \$7 later on**, through reductions in students held back or involved in crime, increased rates of high school and college graduation, and higher salaries when students enter the workforce.

A focus on ensuring healthy development during this timeframe will **pay dividends** throughout life. Delayed, damaged, or insufficient development is very **difficult and expensive** to correct later in life.

Investing in early childhood provides the answer to **global competitiveness**, better health and education outcomes and less crime and poverty.

California employers understand that investing early in children's education will **pay huge economic and social dividends** in the decades to come.

These financial arguments take one of two tacks. Either, they describe potential gains or they posit the need to avoid future costs and/or losses. As you likely noticed, a key term here is "investment." This is intended to convey a desirable outcome brought about with current expenditure. However, this terminology actually indicates expectation of *financial* gain. Thus, with this language, we indicate that the reason to do something is based upon monetary returns. Further, the appropriate way to evaluate choices in society is based upon effects to GDP.

This ECONOMY paradigm is so dominant, evocations of it can be very subtle. Note what's granted primacy here: "There is still a lack of understanding among the general public of how critical early learning is to the development of healthy, **productive citizens** and how we need additional resources to fairly compensate well trained teachers to provide quality care."

These are problematic assumptions to advance. Not only is this ECONOMY frame troublingly salient, it's used tirelessly in opposition to all of the policies you seek. If we indicate the right debate to have is what's best for the ECONOMY, the Chamber of Commerce is a much more credible spokesperson for this viewpoint than you.

For the future

A related trope is rooted in the understanding that *children are the future*. In short, how we treat kids today determines what life will be like for us all tomorrow. This refrain, related to the potential of well cared for and educated kids, goes beyond financials. Gains tend to be phrased in abstractions like “improve their chances for better life outcomes” and “America’s children are prepared to succeed in the 21st century.” Or they’re issued as warnings such as “if we ignore the earliest years, we do so to the detriment of our children, families, communities, and nation.” Note that this frame tends to describe potential gains in collective terms. In other words, they would be good for our state and/or our nation.

This FOR THE FUTURE approach can avoid the problems of the financial focus. But, right now, it tends to be used in pretty emotion-free, terms:

The report provides a blueprint for a child-centered system that **nurtures every child from the beginning of life**.

Last year alone, [these organizations] invested nearly \$560 million to **improve the lives** of California children — more than the top private and community foundations combined.

[This measure was passed] to **support the healthy development** of children.

Research shows that family support programs must focus on the entire family and empower adults in their roles as parents, nurturers, and providers in order to have **a lasting, positive impact on a child’s development**.

We advocate for the types of **environments, experiences, and relationships** that infants and toddlers need in order to thrive.

Promote, support, and **optimize** early childhood development.

Your work centers on what is arguably the most universal and strongly held emotion in the human experience: the love between children and their caretakers. While the images you use often highlight how fundamentally sacred and human these interactions and connections are. But your language seems to shy away from this.

Delayed gratification

Moving from the social benefits described to those that characterize what is in it for individuals, the future once again comes to the fore. In fact, there's a nearly ubiquitous tendency to describe policies for children and families as improving later life:

And the thirst for knowledge that children gain through early childhood education easily translates to **success in life**.

Help all children **achieve their full potential**. Give kids the **right start in life**.

Prepare young people for **success**.

Children can **realize their full potential** in school, work and life.

More children will **grow up** eager to learn, ready for school and inspired with hope.

The State is accountable for ensuring that all of California's K-12 students are graduating from high school **ready for college, career and civic life**.

Studies show that when we neglect developmental or behavioral delays in children, we put them at risk for **life-long problems** in learning, behavior and health.

A child's early experiences profoundly shape their **potential to succeed** in school and life.

The foundations for **long-term success in school and in life** are laid in a child's first five years, but many adults who care for children do not have the support they need to provide quality care and early learning opportunities.

Notably absent in this discourse is any consideration of children's *present happiness*. The smile on a toddler's face, the giggling of a preschooler, the wonder of discovery at any age — these are almost never mentioned.

This stands in stark contrast to how parents and other caretakers describe their desires for their children. It's cliché because it's so common — most adults want the kids in their lives to be happy. Mostly, this is due to filial attachment. But it also has a practical element. Children who are miserable make life much harder for the adults caring for them.

Focusing on future benefits, while failing to mention present-day ones, reifies the individualistic ethos that undergirds dismantling social supports. Consider, for example, this claim, “with college and career readiness as the ultimate goal, we must identify the skills and abilities children need to get there, and then advance policies and allocate resources proven to support children in acquiring them.” The assumption embedded here is that provided adequate resources, all children can possess the “skills and abilities” to be ready for college and career. This is demonstrably false.

Some Californians will never go to college — and many, even with the emotional, cognitive and financial means will not desire to go. Similarly, “career” means a very specific thing more circumscribed than livelihood. It implies white collar work requiring an advanced degree or training. This is an odd objective as it assumes everyone in our state would desire it. Redoubling attention on “success” (usually defined in the narrowest of terms) necessarily impugns the legitimate desires of people. And, in so doing, it contributes to the climate that vilifies low-income parents and guardians who have not achieved these known markers and are thus assumed as inadequate caretakers for their kids.

Human rights

Rather than discuss future potential or productive capacity, a lesser-used frame has us focus on the here and now. Rather than arguing what improved conditions and supports could yield later, this HUMAN RIGHTS frame presents demands based on the inherent worth of people. Most succinctly, this can be expressed as “we owe our young children better.” This author offers a fuller expression of this worldview:

We are coming together to transform the systems that block us all from **fulfilling our human rights** and **living lives of dignity**. We believe that while we struggle to meet our fundamental needs in different ways, our struggles share the same root cause: a system that puts profits before people. We have come together to address this root cause with a root solution: making our government and economy **fulfill human rights principles** by building an organized grassroots movement powerful enough to make that possible.

Unsurprisingly, love figures prominently in this INHERENT RIGHTS OF PEOPLE frame:

No parent should have to choose between the job they need and the **child they love**.

Ultimately, this is about supporting individuals in **becoming the best they can be**.

Turning our backs on kids who are brimming with **happiness and hope** is like saying that 'Failure is OK, because **we really don't care**'.

[This organization] is like having a **second set of eyes** watching out for our kids. The early intervention we received **saved our lives**.

This frame seizes the moral high ground, refusing to cede human needs to economic expediency. It has us focus not on what's lucrative, but what's right. And it privileges the here and now over the could be and some time down the road.

Collective concern

Another decidedly novel framework attests to our interdependence. In direct opposition to the dominant notion of children as private property, this approach suggests that children are the responsibility of everyone.

Admittedly, INTERDEPENDENCE is a very hard sell in our individualistic society. When self-reliance is held up as the key virtue, it's not surprising that arguments that frame demands as means to enable self-reliance via better wages and affordable care are much more common.

There's little existing language to signal from the advocates included in this vein. However, other sources in describing child rearing, parental needs, disparities and childcare compensation do illustrate this approach. When executed it sounds like the following:

We all have a stake in ensuring the next generation has a bright future. Paid time at home for new parents and affordable childcare for growing children is the best way to keep our country strong.

As a society, **we all have a responsibility** to make sure that our children are cared for in the most nurturing environments.

[This organization] keeps me informed of what is happening in terms of policy making, because as a parent I am very busy taking care of my children that I forget that **having a better community** is also a way of taking care of them.

Lessons from Madison Avenue

Notwithstanding the legitimate critiques many of us have toward the makers and marketers of products for young children, examining how they pitch their wares brings into sharp focus the lack of emotion in advocacy. Whether it's products that catch and contain human waste, plastic contraptions that barely last or gear to clutter your home, the corporations pitching to parents understand how to tug at heart strings. These sales people tell us, "when baby arrives, all you need is love." (Accessories sold separately.) They use words like *love*, *devotion*, *confidence* and *showing off* to describe the relationship between caretaker and young child:

Keeping your child safe when he's asleep is crucial to your child's wellbeing and your own peace of mind.

As a new mom, it's perfectly normal to have worries. Just remember that your own instincts can be your best resource. Each time you deal with something new, the experience will help turn you into a more confident mother.

Is anything better than watching your newborn growing and changing every day?

Spend your time taking care of your baby and yourself and getting to know each other.

It's time for his two-month checkup, so get ready to show him off at the doctor's office.

So from their first smile to their first step, we're here to help so you're prepared for every moment of your little one's life.

The first time you hug your baby, the rest of the world will slowly melt away and your life will be forever changed.

No one knows the strength of my love for you. After all, you're the only one who knows the sound of my heart from the inside.

Note how they continuously use direct address (you, your) where advocates tend toward an indistinct "we." Further, even when they make (dubious) claims toward boosting future cognitive ability, their claims are rooted in present day happiness:

All of our products are inspired by a simple and universal idea: the curiosity of young children, and the wish of parents everywhere to **nourish it**.

Once you become a parent, nothing is more important than keeping your baby **healthy and safe**.

Baby Einstein has since expanded to a full line of baby toys and gear designed to **enrich baby's young mind**.

Today, our goals continue to be **enriching the lives** of young families, and **bringing joy** to generations.

And, where they do describe future payoff, the frame is being well not earning lots or conventionally recognized achievement: “You’re going to make me a mother for the first time and forever. I hope that I am able to be a guide for you. I hope that I’m able to **make you the best version of yourself**.”

To be sure, what works to sell diapers doesn’t necessarily translate to diaper legislation. But, if we’re here seeking to create a groundswell of support and to bring our issues top of mind, we do ourselves a disservice by not embracing the feelings inherent in raising children. Further, when we don’t speak in the language of parents and caregivers, it becomes more difficult for them to recognize we argue for what they most want — their children’s happiness.

Concluding Thoughts

Like most progressive advocacy, almost all the discourse considered here is geared toward *stopping* some harm. Whether it’s halting cuts to childcare subsidies, ending restrictions on welfare payments or eliminating discrepancies between children in different communities, there’s text devoted to ameliorating bad actions and signaling harms.

Less often, we see appeals to create something positive. In this vein, I’d list creating Domestic Workers’ Bills of Rights in various states, passing paid leave at the national level and creating universal pre-K as some examples.

Less often still, we seize upon existing wins or positive gains and push these ahead to greater triumphs. When immigration reform had just gone through the Senate, paid sick leave was enacted in New York City and DOMA was struck down, we saw a little bit of language in the “look at all we’ve accomplished, surely this one other things is next.” But those kinds of expressions are few.

Lab experiments and some real world campaigns show us that what I call *messaging from inevitability* is a critical and winning proposition. Put differently, we must describe our wins as a given — a matter not of if but when.

Social cognitive theory dictates that not all behaviors observed will in fact be mimicked. Four specific conditions must be met to maximize potential participation or action: attention, retention, production and motivation. Listeners must take note of the message or intended behavior enough to have it inform their actions, they must have ready recall of the action at the moment it's relevant, they must be able to perform the intended behavior and finally they must be motivated enough to act despite possible deterrents.

The opportunity costs for advocacy, especially among the currently unengaged, are many. To overcome fear, timidity, exhaustion, lack of resources and a whole list of other impediments, it's critical participants feel they are committing time and energy to something achievable. Anchoring a new effort to a recent or important win helps bring a sense of the possible. Effective use of the principle is best illustrated in the campaign for marriage equality. Increasingly, the immigrant rights movement is taking up this approach.

Of course, we must also speak about the problems of and caused by current policy. We need effective strategies to illustrate the harm done by the rules in place today, emphasize the better tomorrow this squanders and assure listeners our victory is not just possible but assured.