

Strategic Messaging to

Defend Public Education & Defeat Authoritarianism

Recommendations from a
Recent Comprehensive Study

August 2023

**POPULAR
COMMS**

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Popular Comms

Strategic Messaging to Defend Public Education
& Defeat Authoritarianism

Introduction

Attacks on public education have been happening for decades, but over the past two years we've seen a dangerous escalation in harmful rhetoric that takes aim at teachers and vulnerable students and seeks to divide the community. Far-right extremists have made public schools and school board meetings a central target for building an authoritarian movement across America. Contriving new controversies (e.g., "Critical Race Theory" and the rights of transgender student athletes), these extremists are fomenting fear, intolerance, and division. While their focus is on 'culture war' issues, it's clear that powerful actors are harnessing this energy to further a longer-term effort to undermine, weaken, defund, and ultimately destroy our public schools.

Popular Comms Institute, in partnership with Change Research, conducted a research study with 3,274 respondents across five battleground states (FL, NC, PA, VA, WA) to test which kinds of messages are most effective in defending public education and defeating authoritarian rhetoric.

In the study, we took authoritarian rhetoric on four issues (public education, "Critical Race Theory," book bans, and transgender student athletes) and, for each issue, we tested the authoritarian message against four different styles of progressive messages. By "progressive," we mean inclusive and pro-public education. For each issue, respondents were randomly assigned one of the progressive messages and asked if they preferred this message or the authoritarian message.

This document provides top-line messaging recommendations, based on our preliminary interpretation of our research data. The references to the study and example messages are excerpts, in order to keep this initial message recommendation document short. **Our full report with all of the data and full messages from the study will be released soon.** You can also watch the video presentation of our research briefing (with HEAL Together, AFT, and People's Action) [here](#).

What We Found

Lead with a positive vision for strong public schools.

Our study found that putting forward a **positive vision** for strengthening public education and investing in our children’s future outperforms authoritarian messages on every issue we tested. In short, our vision for public education is popular and our opponents know it. That’s why they’re trying to change the subject to manufactured social wedge issues—to distract and divide us.

What “positive vision” messaging is:

1. Leads by describing a positive future, rooted in an abundance frame.

“As the next generation of American leaders, our children deserve a quality education that fully prepares them for a bright future in a changing world. They should have access to all of the best technology, accurate and up-to-date learning materials, and support from our teachers, nurses, and counselors. Right now we have a historic opportunity to provide every child in our community with the support they deserve. There are currently millions of federal dollars from the Inflation Reduction Act and the American Rescue Plan Act that have been earmarked for our public schools.”

2. Creates a big “us” in the community, rooted in values and what we all deserve.

“Our future depends on every child from every corner of our state receiving a great education where they live and play. We do not need to settle for the scraps that have been offered in the past. If we come together as a community we can fight to make sure that the abundant resources that are available for our schools are used to their fullest so that our children all get everything they need to see themselves in what they learn about, and to learn without limits.”

How positive vision performed:

This style of message is consistently landing.

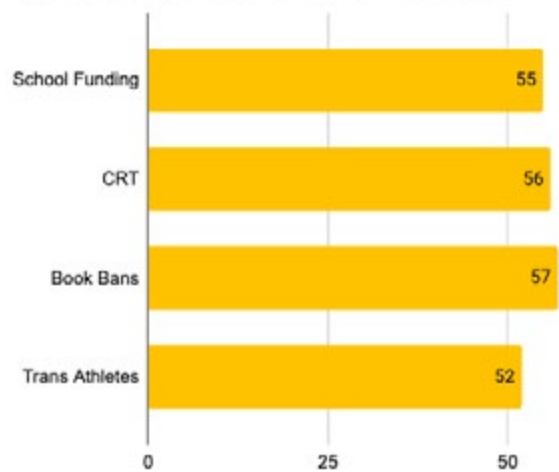
This approach received majoritarian support across all topics, and was very popular with a broad range of people, enjoying majority support across race, education, and age. It was the most popular message type with Democrats, but also drew strong support from Independent and Republican voters.

Recommendation: This type of message should be central to our messaging approach. However, we cannot ignore or be silent about the new authoritarian attacks against students and educators.

The positive vision messages we tested completely ignores what the opposition is saying—even ignoring the issues the authoritarians are trying to get us to talk about. But in reality, educators, school board members, and community members need to directly defend the rights and dignity of students and groups under attack.

Nonetheless, the results from testing positive vision messages point to a promising offensive strategy we can take by advocating for a popular vision of well-funded public schools. In our conclusions section, we provide suggestions about how to weave positive values messages into everything we say.

% Choosing Positive Vision Message



Tell a story about a Big Us vs. a Small Them.

The **Big Us, Small Them** messaging approach provides a **story** that helps people make sense of the new authoritarian attacks. The story starts with **shared values**, points at small but powerful **culprits**, inoculates against their **divide-and-conquer** strategy, and invokes a **big and inclusive “us.”** This approach, and the language we tested, was heavily influenced by research and messaging guidance from Race Class Narrative, We Make the Future, and ASO Communications, as well as our own on-the-ground experience.

What “Big Us, Small Them” messaging is:

1. **Begins by naming shared values**, rooted in what our children deserve.

“Our children should all have the freedom to learn, to pursue their dreams, and to access a quality education that prepares them for success in a changing world.”

2. **Names a culprit** who threatens those values, and who is responsible for the problem.

“Yet for decades, a small group of powerful and well-funded political activists, politicians, operatives, and lobbyists... [...have sought to defund our public schools / ...have been trying to strip away our children’s freedom to learn our nation’s history / ...want to take away our children’s freedom to participate in school activities because of who they are and discriminate against them based on their gender].”

3. **Calls out the motive of the other side’s rhetoric: a divide-and-conquer strategy** that pits us against each other by inventing or exploiting differences based on race, gender, sexuality, etc.

“They’re inventing ways to divide us against each other based on race and difference. It might sound new, but this is the same old strategy that opponents of public education have been using for decades: pit us against each other while they defund our public schools.”

4. **Invokes a big, inclusive multi-racial “us” that is more powerful than the small “them.”**

“It is our responsibility as parents, community members, and school board directors to come together across race and differences to safeguard our children’s freedom to learn and thrive.”

How “Big Us, Small Them” messaging performed:

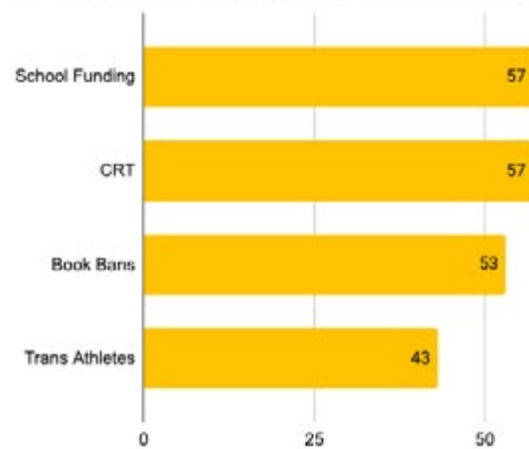
With the exception of the message on Transgender Athletes, **Big Us, Small Them** messages received majoritarian support. **This style of message is consistently landing.** It was chosen by broad swaths of the electorate across all five states, and was particularly popular with younger voters and voters

of color of all educational backgrounds. It was extremely popular with Democrats while also drawing support from Independents and Republicans.

Recommendation: This type of message should be central to our messaging approach.

Its advantage over **positive vision** messaging is that it inoculates against authoritarian messaging.

% Choosing Big Us, Small Them Message



Meet Them Where They Are.

This approach builds on research by Broockman and Calla (2016), whose deep canvass persuasion approach was shown to reduce transphobia, with the change lasting months after the interaction. Even though their studies involved longer in-person persuasion conversations (and our current study simply tests two messages against each other), we saw potential strength in the content and flow of their scripts, which we summarize as **validating people's feelings**, then inviting them to **consider a different perspective**, and then finding **common ground in shared values**.

What “Meet Them Where They Are” messaging is:

1. **Begins by validating people's feelings**, including negative emotions—not by condoning bigotry, but by validating that people may feel afraid, confused, or overwhelmed, especially when they are engaging with an unfamiliar topic.

“It can be hard to understand what it means to be transgender, especially if you’ve never met a person who is transgender.”

“It can be painful to learn about our nation’s past. So many of us have experienced feelings of confusion, anger, or sadness when we learn something difficult or surprising about our country’s history.”

2. **Then, uses “analogic perspective-taking” to persuade**, which means encouraging people to imagine the world from another person’s vantage point.

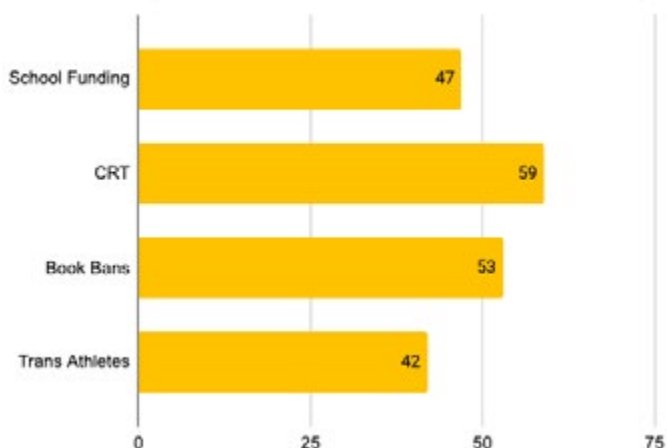
“Each of us, at some point in our lives, has known what it’s like to feel different in some way, based on how much money we have, our race, our religion, or what we look like. No one likes to feel like they don’t belong.”

3. **Persuades by finding common ground rooted in shared values**, and builds a big “us” based on those values: we all want freedom and fairness, we all want to feel like we belong, etc.

“...We don’t want any of our children treated unfairly or unkindly because of who they are. As members of this community, we can choose to include transgender students to make sure they are treated fairly too, including being part of a team.”

How “Meet Them Where They Are” messaging performed:

% Choosing Meet Them Where They Are Message



Our study found **this kind of message landing sometimes, depending on the topic**. It was the most popular of all the message styles on the topic of “Critical Race Theory.” It was also persuasive on book bans, but underperformed on school funding and trans athletes. Moreover, this style of message was often preferred by middle-aged and older voters (50+), and was less popular with younger voters.

Recommendations: Consider your audience. We suspect this may be an effective approach to use when talking to people who are not already familiar

with the topic you’re discussing, and where validation is helpful for opening the door to persuasion.

The message style that progressives may be using most often is performing the worst.

We tested a **Counter-argument** message style not because we thought it would be effective, but because it is the style of messaging that we see being used most commonly by ‘our side’ — by parents, students, and community members who are concerned and are fighting back. We had strategic reservations about this approach, but sought to put together the strongest possible version of it to test against the new authoritarian attacks.

What Counter-argument messaging is:

This approach boils down to proving the other side wrong, either factually or morally.

“Our public schools don’t teach Critical Race Theory. And they are not teaching our white students that they are the oppressors.”

“There is absolutely no evidence that access to athletic opportunities is threatened by transgender athletes.”

“This policy will cause serious harm to kids who are already at risk for bullying, decreased psychological health, and increased risk of self-harm.”

How Counter-argument messaging performed:

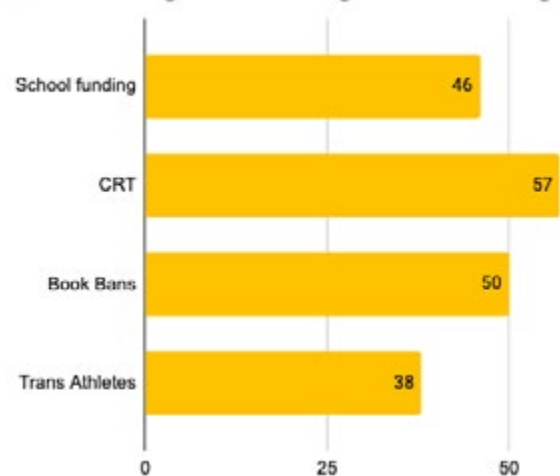
These types of messages do not seem to resonate strongly with the multi-racial working-class. Counter-argument messaging underperformed relative to the opposition’s frame on all topics, other than CRT. (And while it did perform relatively well on the issue of CRT, all of the progressive messages countering the authoritarian messaging on CRT performed well.) Counter-argument was notably unpopular among non-college educated voters across races and among Independents and Republicans.

These messages may be performing poorly because they strongly emphasize facts and often include specialized terminology or jargon that can inadvertently come across as condescending or alienating to people in the community who may not share the same specialized vocabulary. This may inadvertently play into the opposition’s strategic framing, which seeks to portray our side as elitist.

In addition, this style of messaging often focuses on naming the very real harms that will affect victims of authoritarian attacks (e.g., transgender students), but it doesn’t narrate these individuals as active protagonists or elaborate anything about them other than their victimization, which prior research (e.g., Melvin Lerner) has shown to have a repelling effect.

Recommendation: Avoid this approach to messaging. See the top-line recommendations section for more specific messaging guidance.

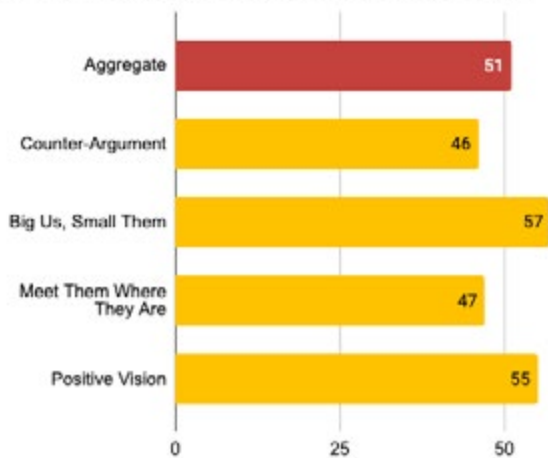
% Choosing Counter-Argument Message



By Each Issue

School Funding

% Choosing Anti-Authoritarian Message



What we found is that fully funding public schools is popular on average. Most Americans want their children to have an education that sets them up to pursue their dreams, with well-funded public schools that have the resources for a great learning experience. But some messages land better than others. **Counter-argument** and **Meet Them Where They Are** style messages consistently under-performed, while **Big Us, Small Them** and **Positive Vision** style messaging were consistently chosen by clear majorities of voters.

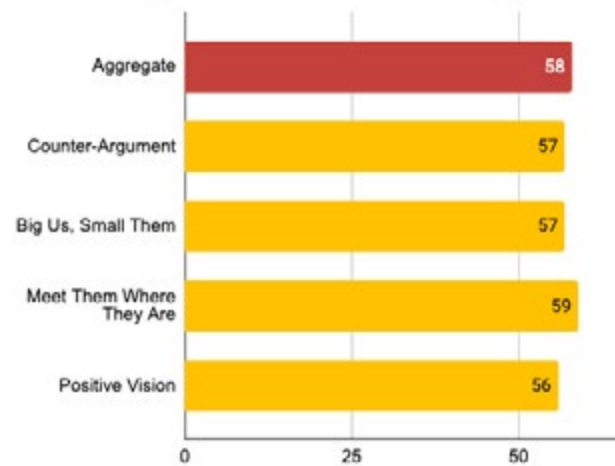
Best-Performing Message on School Funding: Big Us, Small Them

“We all want our children to succeed, no matter what zip code we live in or how much money we make. Public education is all about the future of our children and the future of our country. Yet for decades, a small group of powerful and well-funded political activists, politicians, operatives, and lobbyists have sought to defund our public schools. They’ve slashed school budgets, cut teacher pay, attacked the curriculum and our teachers, and stripped away much needed programs and resources for our children like music, physical education, libraries, and the arts. Their ultimate goal is to tank public education by blaming teachers and excluding kids based on their differences in order to divide people in our community against each other. They know that if we fight each other, we’ll be distracted while they continue to use voucher schemes to take money from our public schools while benefiting wealthy private schools. We cannot allow this long-con to continue. Supporting our community and all the families who live here means that we have to come together to support and fully fund our public schools. When all of our children have the freedom to succeed, we are all better for it.”

Attempts to Ban “Critical Race Theory”

Banning “critical race theory” in schools is not a majoritarian position! The opposition is weak on this topic. Our results show that there are multiple ways to land a successful message about teaching about race and racism in public schools. Progressive messages beat the authoritarian message across the board, including winning over a third of registered Republicans, 59% of respondents in rural Florida, and clear majorities of voters across race.

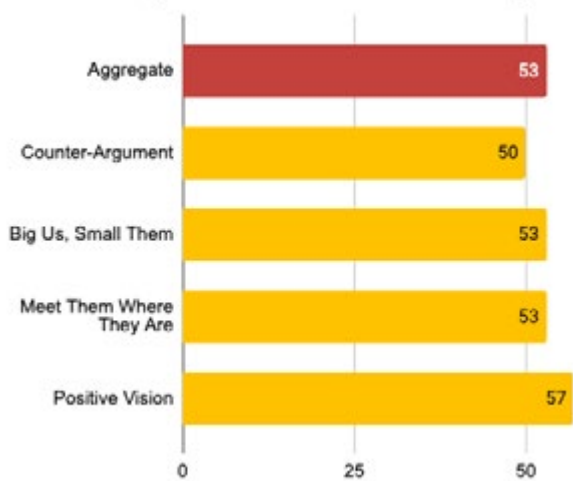
% Choosing Anti-Authoritarian Message



Best-Performing Message on “Critical Race Theory”: Meet Them Where They Are

“It can be painful to learn about our nation’s past. So many of us have experienced feelings of confusion, anger, or sadness when we learn something difficult or surprising about our country’s history. These lessons are not easy ones. But trying to hide the truth from our children or shelter them from our country’s mistakes is no solution. We’ve all had the experience of going through something difficult and then learning something important about ourselves and who we are that makes us stronger and better on the other side. That’s what these conversations about our country’s history can do for our kids and the future of our country. The recent discussions in our community about teaching Black history in our schools is important because it provides us an opportunity for our children to learn from our past so they can better prepare for the future, and build a country where everyone belongs and has the opportunity to thrive. We all care about protecting our children’s freedoms and providing the best education possible to kickstart their futures. We can come together right now to make sure that happens.”

% Choosing Anti-Authoritarian Message



Attempts to Ban Books

More good news : Banning books is not popular either! A majority of the respondents we sampled preferred messages that oppose book bans, although the **Counter-argument** style message fared worse than the other messages.

The **Positive Vision** message was the most popular, but it does not directly engage with the topic of book bans. The **Big Us, Small Them** and the **Meet Them Where They Are** messaging do directly engage with the topic and also draw consistent majoritarian support. These messages lead with the shared values of freedom and unity,

and we recommend emphasizing these values when it comes to messaging about book bans. Here are some examples:

“Our children should all have the freedom to learn, to pursue their dreams, and to access a quality education that prepares them for success in a changing world.”

“Book bans are an affront to our shared American value of freedom. A large majority of Americans do not support book bans in our public schools and libraries.”

Best-Performing Message on Book Bans: Positive Vision

“As the next generation of American leaders, our children deserve a quality education that fully prepares them for a bright future in a changing world. They should have access to all of the best technology, accurate and up-to-date learning materials, and support from our teachers, nurses, and counselors. Right now we have a historic opportunity to provide every child in our community with the support they deserve. There are currently millions of federal dollars from the Inflation Reduction Act and the American Rescue Plan Act that have been earmarked for our public schools. Our future depends on every child from every corner of our state receiving a great education where they live and play. We do not need to settle for the scraps that have been offered in the past. If we come together as a community we can fight to make sure that the abundant resources that are available for our schools are used to their fullest so that our children all get everything they need to see themselves in what they learn about, and to learn without limits.”

Transgender Athletes

We presently face an uphill battle on transgender issues under our opponents’ athletics frame. Messages countering the authoritarian “fairness in athletics” frame generally performed worse than anti-authoritarian messages for other categories.

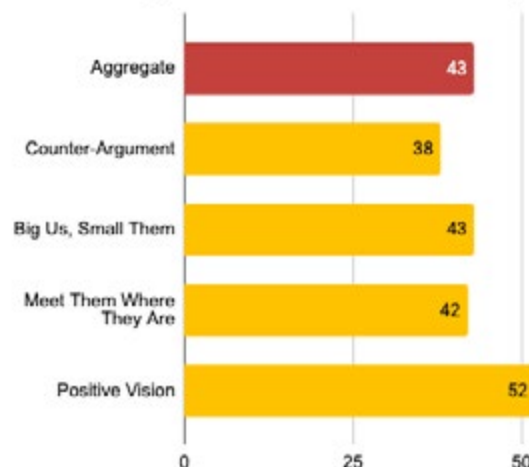
Positive Vision is the only category that outperformed the authoritarian frame, but this approach does not directly address the topic.

What do we do with this? On the one hand, we recognize that authoritarians are attempting to use this as a wedge issue to shift the conversation away from our popular public education agenda. On the other hand, we know we can’t fully avoid talking about the issue either—**we cannot protect transgender people by avoiding the topic.** When majority opinion appears to be on the wrong side of history, **our job is to figure out how to move public opinion.** For this, more research and organizing will be necessary.

We recommend using an **offense → defense → offense approach** (which we also highlight in our messaging recommendations section). This means starting with our winning message, which is a positive vision for public schools. Then, providing a story that inoculates against the attempts of a powerful few to exploit differences in gender to divide us and shift attention away from our vision, while standing up for the dignity and rights of our trans students. Finally, returning to the popular agenda of public schools that have abundant resources and value the freedom for all children to learn, thrive, and pursue their dreams.

We need more research and testing to identify the best ways to fight back against the authoritarian attacks, but we also recommend these resources on how to message on this issue: [Transgender Youth and the Freedom to Be Ourselves](#), and [Talking About Transgender Youth Participation in Sports](#) messaging guides.

% Choosing Anti-Authoritarian Message



Top-line Messaging Recommendations

What to AVOID

Condescension: Avoid rhetoric that plays into the authoritarian narrative that frames liberals as condescending over-educated affluent elites. It may be an unfair narrative, and those using it may be completely hypocritical, but that doesn't mean it's not an effective framing strategy of our opponents. With intention, we can avoid inadvertently playing into our opponent's strategic narrative about us.

Punching down (or over) at other parents: Related to avoiding condescension, keep your narrative focused on the powerful actors who are plotting to divide us and to undermine and defund public education — not on 'backward' parents and community members.

Coming at people “with the facts”: We know from numerous studies on confirmation bias that most people most of the time leave rational arguments more committed to their prior beliefs than they were before the argument.

- This approach can also play into the “condescending elitist” narrative (Subtext: “I am highly educated and I know the facts, while you are ignorant and backwards.”)
- The good news is that **stories, in contrast to rational arguments**, can be disarming and persuasive. They invite empathy and perspective-taking, and open up space for people to reconsider prior views.

Introducing vulnerable and targeted students as victims first: It's not fair, but psychologists have long recognized a common tendency to blame victims, rather than sympathize with them. The good news is that the simple act of first establishing individuals as protagonists with goals (for example, a student who has a dream about their future) and then introducing how something or someone is threatening or stopping them, increases empathy and invites perspective-taking.

What to DO or SAY

Provide a STORY that helps people make sense of the new authoritarian attacks...

...a story that:

- Inoculates against authoritarian appeals by **naming culprits and their motive**, i.e., what they stand to gain by inventing new ways to divide us against each other.
 - Claims **unity** as our value, casts our opponents as the dividers.
- Claims and grounds people in **shared positive values** about providing quality public education and a safe and positive learning environment that sets up our children for a bright future.
 - Claims **responsibility** as our value: responsibility for our children's future.

Appeal to Shared Values: Invoke shared values, including freedom, fairness, opportunity, community, belonging, unity, responsibility, protecting schools and children from harm, anti-extremism, and the common good vs. the political agenda of a few.

- **Our values are popular:** let's talk and act like that's the case! In school board fights, we can claim the interests of all students—regardless of their race, gender identity, or any other difference—as the popular interest.

Paint a Picture of Abundance:

- Add textured descriptions about our students' aspirations and needs and how we can be providing for them (e.g., “the best technology, learning materials, and support from our teachers, nurses, and counselors that will prepare them for a bright future”).

Play Offense → Defense → Offense.

1. **Start with our popular positive vision** for strengthening, improving, and investing in quality public education.
2. Then **provide a story that inoculates** against the new lines of authoritarian attack, **while standing up with and for groups that are being targeted.**
3. Then bridge back to **our positive vision again.**

We don't have to choose between popular messages and persuasive messages that shift what is popular; we can do and must do both!

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Stay tuned for our full report, coming soon.

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