



MAKE THE CASE
SCHOOL FUNDING

Why does money matter in districts and schools?

It matters because the resources that students need cost money.

This means that funding systems can advance educational resource equity or hinder it.¹

Equitable per-pupil spending is positively associated with improved student outcomes.²

But how that money is spent matters too. Many schooling resources are positively associated with student outcomes:³



high-quality curriculum



competitive teacher compensation



early childhood programs

An equitable funding system is key to ensuring that all students have access to a high-quality education.

Sustained and significant increases in school funding have far-reaching, long-term benefits too, especially for students from low-income backgrounds:⁴



Boost academic performance with improved test scores and higher graduation rates.



Increase college enrollment among students, as well as the level of education students complete.



Reduce poverty in adulthood and increase wages.

And a school funding system should be:⁵



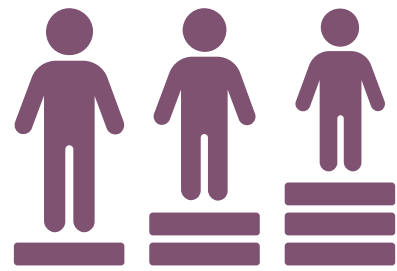
Transparent & Accessible

With clear, easy-to-understand rules for where, how, and why funds are distributed.



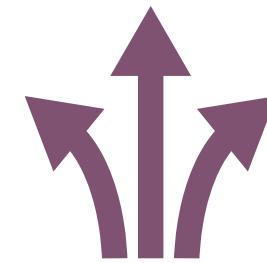
Predictable & Stable

School leaders can identify priorities and make shifts based on an understanding of potential future changes in funding.



Equitable

with additional spending on students with higher needs.



Flexible

School leaders can invest in a combination of resources that respond to their students' unique needs.



Equal funding in school districts is not good enough.

Schools need **2-3 times** as much funding to help students from traditionally underserved backgrounds achieve similar educational outcomes as their more affluent peers.⁶

Our education system is plagued with persistent and longstanding funding inequities, with the fewest resources going to the districts and schools that need the most. As a result, millions of students are not getting the resources they need to succeed.

Funding disparities within and across districts disproportionately impact students of color and students from low-income backgrounds.

Districts with the most Black, Latino, and Native students receive:⁷



Students of color have long been denied fair school funding because their communities have been long been denied fair opportunities to build wealth, due to systemic racism. The legacy of housing discrimination still shows up in school funding patterns today.

5% less

average difference in state and local revenue between high-poverty districts and low-poverty districts, or equivalent to*⁹



Hiring at least 3 additional teachers



Offering targeted, intensive tutoring opportunities



Buying a laptop for every student

*assuming 500 students in a school

Making the case for **Equitable School Funding** hinges on effectively communicating their importance, urgency, and connection to your community.

3 Key Elements of Effective Messaging



Keep it simple.



Know your audience.



Make an emotional connection.

3 Key Elements of Effective Messaging

Know your audience.

Who is your audience?

- District leaders and policymakers?
- School board members?
- Other advocates?
- Parents, students, families?

What publications do they read? What media do they consume?

- Education Week?
- Boston Herald?
- Dallas Morning News?
- TikTok? Twitter/X?

What does your audience care about?

- Start with what they value.
- Connect their values with your advocacy message.

Make an emotional connection.

Don't rely on statistics to make your point.

"Show, don't tell" how this current issue (or your proposed policy solution) impacts students.

- Create an emotional response — make it clear why we all need to care!
- Use real stories about students to highlight the urgency of addressing inequities.

Tell your personal story.

- Why do you care about this issue? Did you have a similar experience in school?
- How does this impact you as a parent, advocate, or community member?
- Ultimately, who are the people on the ground being affected, and how can you lift up their voices and stories to move people to act?

Keep it simple.

Your messages need to be short.

- Describe your main advocacy point in 10 words or less.
- Make your messages quotable and easy to remember.
- Think of what you would say in a tweet.

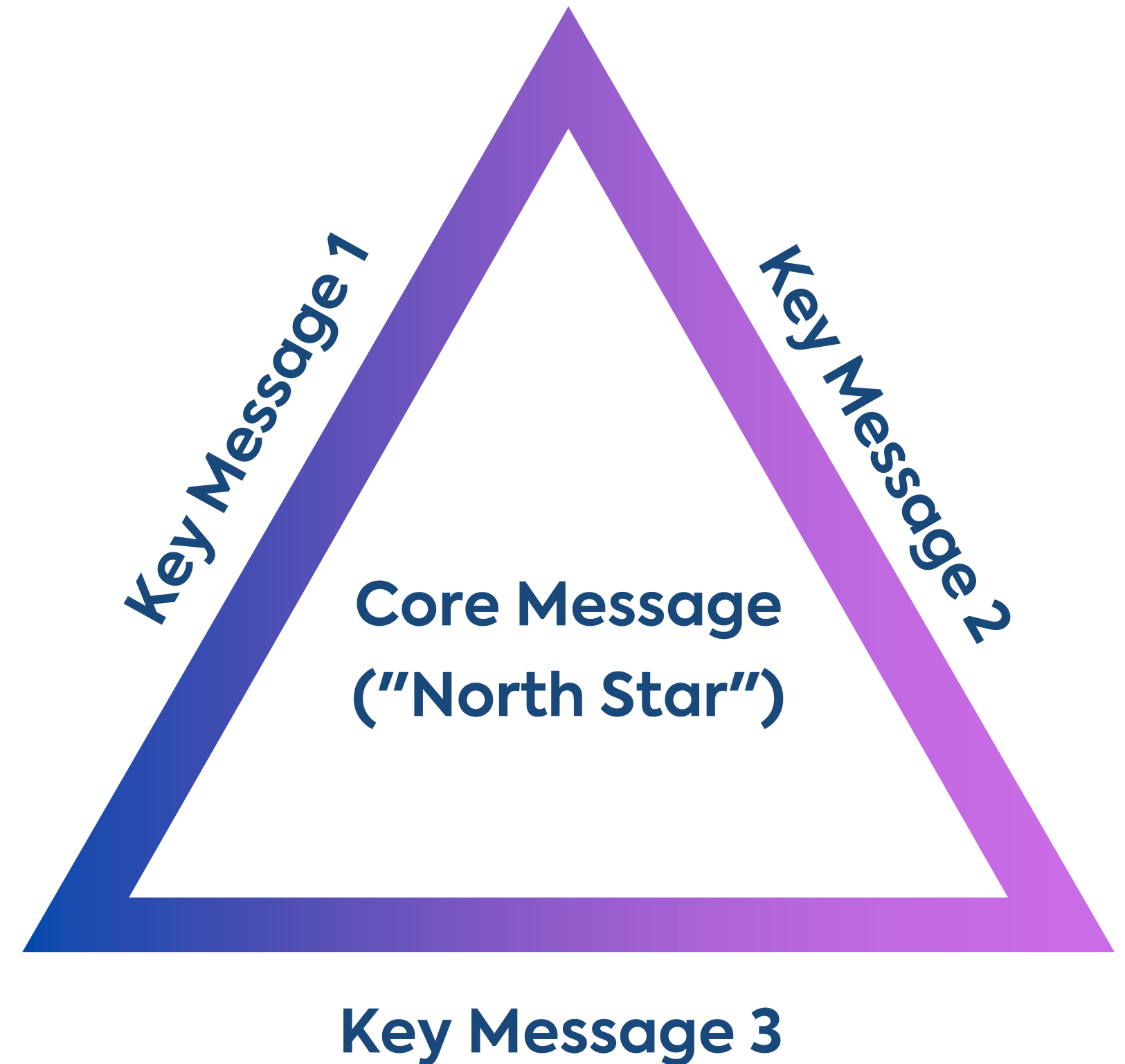
Avoid jargon and education speak.

Message Triangle Fast Facts

- Based on the principle that it is easier to visualize an image than it is to memorize a lot of words.
- Structured specifically **for social change and advocacy messages**: provides a structure to frame issues in a way that resonates with people's core values, makes the message personal, and can be tailored to a specific audience.
- Helps identify and home in on **1 core message and 3 supporting, key messages** that are compelling, credible, and concise.
- Offers structural focus but is not intended as a script.

Your core message is the North Star message you are trying to get across.

Your 3 key messages are what will move your audience toward your ultimate objective.



Creating a Message Triangle to Tell Your District's Story



Review Key Questions

Review the Alliance for Resource Equity's Key Questions on School Funding:

- **Key Question 1.1:** Does the funding system distribute adequate funding based on student needs and enable flexible use of funds in ways that are clearly understood?

Identify your "North Star" or Core Message

Solidify the core of what you aim to communicate. What is the underlying vision?

- Consider iterating on the vision identified by the Alliance for Resource Equity:

Each student attends school in a district that distributes funding based on the needs of its students, by way of flexible and transparent funding systems, so all students can reach high standards and thrive.

Form Messages by Analyzing Data

Use available data to form 2 messages that outline the problem and the impact or relevance it could have.

- See Appendix A for list of data metrics.
- Prepare a powerful data metric, sound bite, and narrative for your key messages.

Create a Call to Action

Form the last key message to outline your call to action.

- What action are you requesting from your district
- What is the most immediate next step?
- What do you want your audience to act on?

Forming Key Messages 101

1

Start by analyzing metrics (Appendix A) to help answer the key question in the dimension.

For instance, looking at the comparison of per student spending (by % of students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, and English learners, as well as by school type and size could help determine the answer to Key Question 1.1: “Does the funding system distribute adequate funding based on student needs and enable flexible use of funds in ways that are clearly understood?”

2

Consider the available data points.

How strong of a story do they tell? How directly do they speak to the issue?

Let’s suppose we learn that students with disabilities attending schools with the largest percentage of students from low-income backgrounds receive only a marginal amount more per-pupil, compared to students with disabilities attending the wealthiest schools in the district. **We decide to use these data points to inform our key messages.**

3

Solidify the message.

- **Key Message 1 identifies the issue:** “Schools serving a higher proportion of students from low-income backgrounds must stretch their dollars farther to support their students with disabilities.”
- **Key Message 2 clarifies why this matters:** “Equal funding across our schools is not sufficient. Students with disabilities from low-income backgrounds have unique needs that require additional resources.”
- **Key Message 3 advances a call to action:** “The district must examine the barriers that allocations to be strategically targeted towards students’ unique needs, and work with the community to address these issues.”

4

Prepare additional elements to use as needed for each of your key messages. For Key Message 1, this could look like:

- **An illustrative data metric:** “Across all school levels, students with disabilities attending schools with the largest percentage of students from low-income backgrounds only receive \$800 more per-pupil, compared to students with disabilities attending the wealthiest schools in the district.”
- **A punchy soundbite to use for an interview:** “We must ensure all of our elementary students with disabilities, regardless of the school they attend, receive the resources they need to succeed.”
- **A powerful narrative element:** Source a spokesperson that can articulately speak to how this issue has impacted their experiences.

District X Example

Key Message 1

Schools serving a higher proportion of students from low-income backgrounds must stretch their dollars farther to support their students with disabilities.



DATA METRIC: Across all school levels, students with disabilities attending schools with the largest percentage of students from low-income backgrounds only receive \$800 more per-pupil, compared to students with disabilities attending the wealthiest schools in the district.



SOUND BITE: “We must ensure all of our elementary students with disabilities, regardless of the school they attend, receive the resources they need to succeed.”



NARRATIVE: Share an example of how limited funding has impacted the resources that are available to students with disabilities that attend these schools.



DATA METRIC: Our district has a lot of control over how to spend funds equitably and can establish systems for distributing local funds based on strategic, student-based approaches.



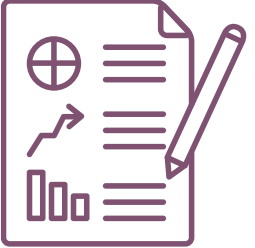
SOUND BITE: “The fact is, more money matters. It’s time for our district leadership to address the barriers that are preventing a more strategic allocation of available school funds.”



NARRATIVE: Share some actionable suggestions of how the district can engage the community on this issue.

Key Message 2

Equal funding across our schools is not sufficient. Students with disabilities from low-income backgrounds have unique needs that require additional resources.



DATA METRIC: Research shows that schools serving higher proportions of students from low-income backgrounds require 2-3 times higher per-pupil expenditure to achieve similar educational outcomes as their more affluent peers.



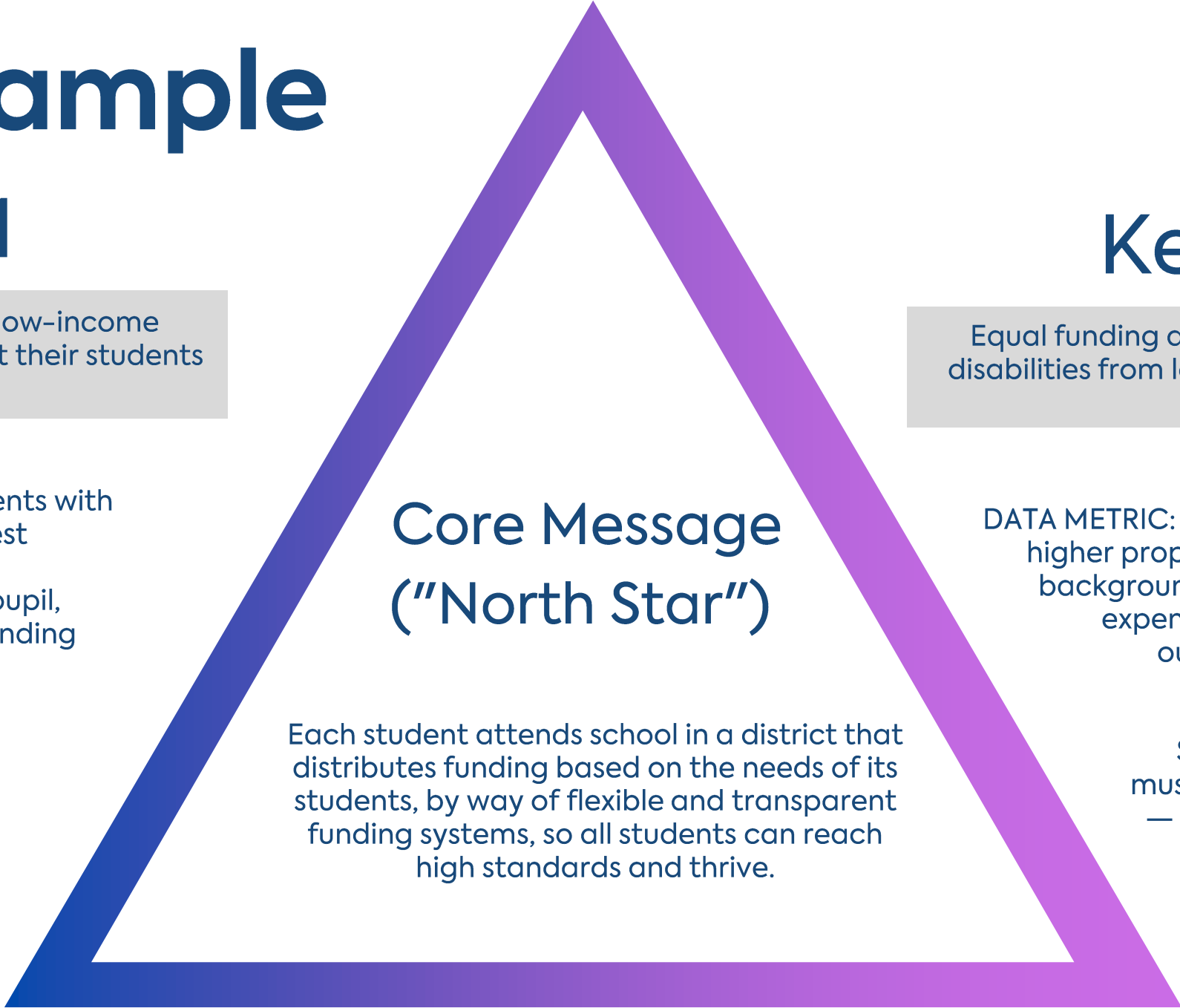
SOUND BITE: “Our budget allocations must find a way to provide more funding — not equal, and certainly not less — to meet the needs of our students with disabilities from low-income backgrounds.”



NARRATIVE: Share how strategic allocation could support and sustain additional resources for students with disabilities..

Key Message 3

The district must examine the barriers that allocations to be strategically targeted towards students’ unique needs, and work with the community to address these issues.



Message Triangle Checklist

Does your message triangle do ALL of the following?



Align with the shared values of your audience?

- Shared values allow the conversation to start from a place of agreement.
- This requires knowing your audience first!



Define the impact?

- Do your supporting facts (data metrics, narratives, soundbites) explain how those shared values are being undermined? Clearly outlining the consequences and inequities helps convey a sense of urgency without exaggerating the problem.



Asset-frame the issue?

- Define the scope of the issue in terms of systems and structures, not students, and avoid defining marginalized communities using deficit-based language.



Highlight the benefits?

- After establishing the issue/problem, explain how your solution SUPPORTS your shared values. Explicitly stating the value helps reaffirm tangible outputs your stakeholder cares about.



Include a call to action?

- A positive vision helps your audience realize what's possible and recognize the role they play in sparking the change.

Dismantling Opposition and Avoiding Traps

- **Bad information:** Don't repeat the negative, incorrect, or inflammatory language. Instead, find a positive spin in your response and/or calmly correct misinformation before moving to your positive response.
- **Speculation:** Instead of trying to predict the future, reiterate your key message and the information you do know.
- **Irrelevant Question:** Use a bridging statement to connect back to your key message.



Question/concern that ...

- Distracts from key issue
- Introduces dangerous line of opposition
- Expresses different mission/goal

BRIDGING STATEMENT

Your response, which hits on your key messages in service of core "North Star" message

- "I find the more important issue to be..."
- "Let me emphasize again..."
- "What matters most in this situation is this: ..."
- "What I've said comes down to this..."
- "And that reminds me..."
- "Here's the real problem..."
- "I think it would be more accurate (or correct) to say..."
- "It all boils down to this..."
- "While ___ is important, it's also important to remember that..."
- "Before we leave this subject, I need to add..."



Question/concern that ...

- Distracts from key issue
- Introduces dangerous line of opposition
- Expresses different mission/goal

BRIDGING STATEMENT

Your response hits on your key messages in service of core "North Star" message

More money does not matter.

While I agree that increased funding alone is not the answer, it's important to recognize that...

Research overwhelmingly shows that more money, in combination with how districts spend it, has huge impacts for students, especially students from low-income backgrounds and students of color. Districts and schools cannot provide high-quality resources such as experienced educators, advanced coursework, and extra-curriculars without sufficient funding.

High-needs schools already receive more funding than lower-needs schools. We can't be allocating even more.

If we consider the evidence and research on the topic, it becomes clear that...

Schools serving students with more needs should receive more funding. Research shows that schools that predominantly serve students from low-income backgrounds must spend 2-3 times as much per pupil to achieve similar educational outcomes as schools serving wealthier students.

As a district, we're limited in what we can do. It's the state funding formula that dictates how much money we get.

While state funding formulas do determine a large allocation of funds, I want to emphasize that...

Some districts have a lot of control over how to spend these funds effectively. Local school boards and/or school district administrators establish systems for distributing local funds and can use student-based approaches that direct funding where it will help most by allocating resources based on student needs, and taking into consideration best practice, research-based supports and investments.

FAQ's

Why does this example message triangle work?

- All key messages connect to one another
- Each key message includes a data metric, soundbite, and narrative element.
- Each element is concise and asset-framed.
- Each key message speaks directly to the core message in center of triangle

What if we don't have access to the information we need for the data metrics?

- Ask your district if they will provide the data to you.
- Use this message triangle to push for better data transparency.
- In the meantime, rely on national data trends instead.

What makes for an effective narrative element?

- The best story to share is your own!
- But don't get bogged down by the details. Ask yourself what you are trying to communicate, what emotions you want to evoke, and why this specific issue matters to you.

What makes for a compelling soundbite?

- Define your objectives – what do you want others to remember?
- Be concise (aim for 10 seconds or less), clear (avoid jargon, acronyms, technical terms), and catchy (consider using a quick story, anecdote, metaphor, etc. to help illustrate your point.)
- Practice! The best soundbites are authentic but not off the cuff.

What do you mean by asset framing? How do I do that?

- Data doesn't frame itself...and is susceptible to misinterpretation.
- This misinterpretation is especially harmful to historically marginalized communities.
- Key messages should highlight the systems and structures within your district that act as barriers to equitable opportunities and outcomes. This "structure-not-student" approach is known as **asset-framing**.
- Asset-framing places the responsibility on leaders and systems, emphasizing system-level action and does not blame or fault students.

How do I use this message triangle?

- Make it the backbone of your messaging efforts.
- Use it to practice, practice, practice articulating the issue.
- Use it to stay focused on key points, especially when the opposition tries to throw you off course.
- Use it alongside the Alliance for Resource Equity diagnostic tool to more thoroughly assess the state of school funding in your district, as well as in combination with the guidebooks to dig deeper into root causes and potential actions.

What is the Alliance for Resource Equity? How do I learn more?

- The Alliance for Resource Equity is a partnership between EdTrust and Education Resource Strategies.
- We focus on 10 key dimensions of resource equity – providing tools and resources to help advocates and districts work together to consider how resources (people, time, and money) are spent and distributed.
- Learn more at www.educationresourceequity.org

FAQ's

Why does this sample message triangle work?

- All key messages connect to one another.
- Each key message includes a data metric, soundbite, and narrative element.
- Each element is concise and uses asset-framing.
- Each key message speaks directly to the core message in center of triangle.

What if we don't have access to the information we need for the data metrics?

- Ask your district to provide the data to you.
- Use this message triangle to push for better data transparency.
- In the meantime, rely on national data trends instead.

What makes for an effective narrative element?

- The best story to share is your own!
- But don't get bogged down by the details. Ask yourself what you are trying to communicate, what emotions you want to evoke, and why this specific issue matters to you.

What makes for a compelling sound bite?

- Define your objectives — what do you want others to remember?
- Be concise (aim for 10 seconds or less), clear (avoid jargon, acronyms, technical terms), and catchy (consider using a quick story, anecdote, metaphor, etc. to help illustrate your point.)
- Practice! The best sound bites are authentic but not off the cuff.

What do you mean by asset-framing? How do I do that?

- Data doesn't frame itself ... and is susceptible to misinterpretation.
- This misinterpretation is especially harmful to historically marginalized communities.
- Key messages should highlight the systems and structures within your district that act as barriers to equitable opportunities and outcomes. This "structure-not-student" approach is known as **asset-framing**.
- Asset-framing places the responsibility on leaders and systems, emphasizing system-level action and does not blame or fault students.

How do I use this message triangle?

- Make it the backbone of your messaging efforts.
- Use it to practice, practice, practice articulating the issue.
- Use it to stay focused on key points, especially when the opposition tries to throw you off course.
- Use it alongside the Alliance for Resource Equity [diagnostic tool](#) to more thoroughly assess the state of [school funding](#) in your district, as well as in combination with the [guidebooks](#) to dig deeper into root causes and potential actions.

What is the Alliance for Resource Equity? How do I learn more?

- The Alliance for Resource Equity is a partnership between EdTrust and Education Resource Strategies.
- We focus on 10 key dimensions of resource equity — providing tools and resources to help advocates and districts work together to consider how resources (people, time, and money) are spent and distributed.
- Learn more at www.educationresourceequity.org.

Endnotes

1. Baker, B. (2016). "Does Money Matter in Education?." Albert Shanker Institute, 2016. http://www.shankerinstitute.org/sites/shanker/files/moneymatters_edition2.pdf; Hanushek, E. (1997). "Assessing the Effects of School Resources on Student Performance: An Update." *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis*. <http://hanushek.stanford.edu/publications/assessing-effects-school-resources-student-performance-update>.
2. Kreisman, D. & Steinberg, M.P. (2019). "The Effect of Increased Funding on Student Achievement: Evidence From Texas's Small District Adjustment." EdWorkingPaper No.19-58. Annenberg Institute at Brown University: <http://edworkingpapers.com/ai19-58>; Baron, E.J., (2019). "School Spending and Student Outcomes: Evidence from Revenue Limit Elections in Wisconsin." *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 14 (1): 1-39. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3430766>; Rauscher, E. (2019). "Delayed Benefits: Effects of California School District Bond Elections on Achievement by Socioeconomic Status." EdWorkingPaper No.19-18. Annenberg Institute at Brown University. <http://edworkingpapers.com/ai19-18>; Jackson, C. K. (2020). "Does school spending matter? The new literature on an old question." L. Tach, R. Dunifon, & D. L. Miller (Eds.), "Confronting inequality: How policies and practices shape children's opportunities" (pp. 165-186). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000187-008>; Abott, C., Kogan, V., Lavertu, S., Peskowitz, Z. (2020). "School District Operational Spending and Student Outcomes: Evidence from Tax Elections in Seven States." EdWorkingPaper: 19-25. Annenberg Institute at Brown University. <https://doi.org/10.26300/mdtk-8743>; Baker, B. (2016).
3. Martin, C.; Boser, U., Benner, M. (2018). "A Quality Approach to School Funding: Lessons Learned from School Finance Litigation." The Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/quality-approach-school-funding/>.
4. Jackson, C.K., Johnson, R. C., Persico, C. (2016). "The Effects of School Spending on Educational and Economic Outcomes: Evidence from School Finance Reforms." National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w20847.pdf>; LaFortune, J., Rothstein, J., Whitmore, D., Schanzenbach. (2016). "School Finance Reform and the Distribution of Student Achievement." National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w22011.pdf>; Biasi, B. (2019). "School Finance Equalization Increases Intergenerational Mobility: Evidence from a Simulated-Instruments Approach." National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED594376>.
5. *The Education Combination*. The Alliance for Resource Equity. Available at: <https://educationresourceequity.org/wp-content/uploads/documents/education-combination.pdf>.
6. Duncombe, W., Yinger, J. (2004). "How Much More Does a Disadvantaged Student Cost?" Center for Policy Research. 103. <https://surface.syr.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1102&context=cpr>; Baker, B., Weber, M., Srikanth, A., Kim, R., Atzbi, M. (2018). "The Real Shame of the Nation." Rutgers University, 2018. <http://www.shankerinstitute.org/sites/shanker/files/The%20Real%20Shame%20of%20the%20Nation.pdf>.
7. Morgan, I. (2022). "Equal is Not Good Enough: An Analysis of School Funding Equity Across the U.S and Within Each State." The Education Trust. <https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Equal-Is-Not-Good-Enough-December-2022.pdf>.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.

Key Question	Data Metric	Data Source
<p>Key Question 1.1 Does the funding system distribute adequate funding based on student needs and enable flexible use of funds in ways that are clearly understood?</p>	<p>Scatterplot comparison of per-student spending total, by % of students of color (or by individual racial/ethnic subgroup), and by school type (elementary, middle, high school).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Edunomics NERDS database • State of Funding Equity Tool • Urban Institute/NCES

DATA NOTES: It's important to consider funding sources at the state/local level, as well as the federal contribution. The tools listed above can help. The NERDS database does not include consistent student demographic data but can be merged with data from Urban Institute/NCES by School ID #. The State of Funding Equity tool can be toggled to filter data by revenue source, district, and school-level, and student demographics at the middle of the page.

YOUR DISTRICT:

Key Message 1



DATA METRIC: _____



SOUNDBITE: _____



NARRATIVE: _____

Core Message
("North Star")

Key Message 2

DATA METRIC: _____



SOUNDBITE: _____



NARRATIVE: _____



Key Message 3



DATA METRIC: _____



SOUNDBITE: _____



NARRATIVE: _____

