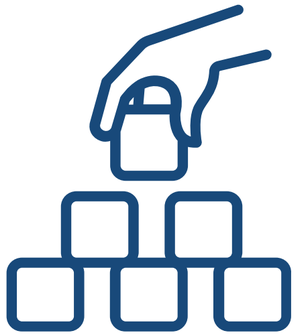
MAKE THE CASE

HIGH-QUALITY EARLY LEARNING

ALLIANCE FOR RESOURCE EQUITY

High-quality early childhood education, when followed by high-quality elementary experiences, has positive cascading effects through a child's elementary years and beyond.



High-quality early learning, including infant/toddler programs and preschool, are crucial for **promoting a strong foundation for children during a period of rapid cognitive, social, and emotional development** in the first five years of a child's life.[1]

There are lifelong benefits too: High-quality ECE has been associated with higher employment, better health, and **better cognitive and social-emotional skills**, among many others.[3]

Attending a high-quality preschool program, especially a full-day program**, can help prepare children** — especially those from low-income backgrounds — for school academically, socially, and emotionally.[2]

Impact can be multi-generational. Children whose parents attended high-quality early childhood programs have fewer school suspensions and better education outcomes overall, as well as better employment and health outcomes.[4]

Young children of color and from low-income backgrounds are **disproportionally shut out of high-quality learning opportunities**, which can have a cascading effect throughout their K-12 education and beyond.

The children who could benefit most from high-quality preschool remain least likely to be enrolled.[5]

1% of Black 3- and 4-year-olds, on average, across 26 states, are enrolled in state preschool programs defined as high-quality by the National Institute for Early Education Research.[6]

4% of Latino 3- and 4-year-olds, on average, across 26 states, are enrolled in state preschool programs defined as high-quality by the National Institute for Early Education Research.[7]

18% of children from low-income backgrounds are enrolled in high-quality pre-kindergarten programs.[8]

Studies often find that economically disadvantaged and dual-language learners experience greater academic growth during preschool than their more affluent and native English-speaking peers.[9]

Children of color may not have access to — and are, therefore, not enrolled in — high-quality programs.[10]

Young children benefit greatly from exposure to racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity during their early learning experiences.[11]

Yet early learning programs are often more racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically segregated than programs serving older students.[12]

1 in 5

children are enrolled in a program that is both racially and socioeconomically diverse.[13]

Making the case for improving access to **High-Quality Early Learning** hinges on effectively communicating its 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 and 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 those voices and stories and move people to act?

Keep it simple.

Your messages need to be short.

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

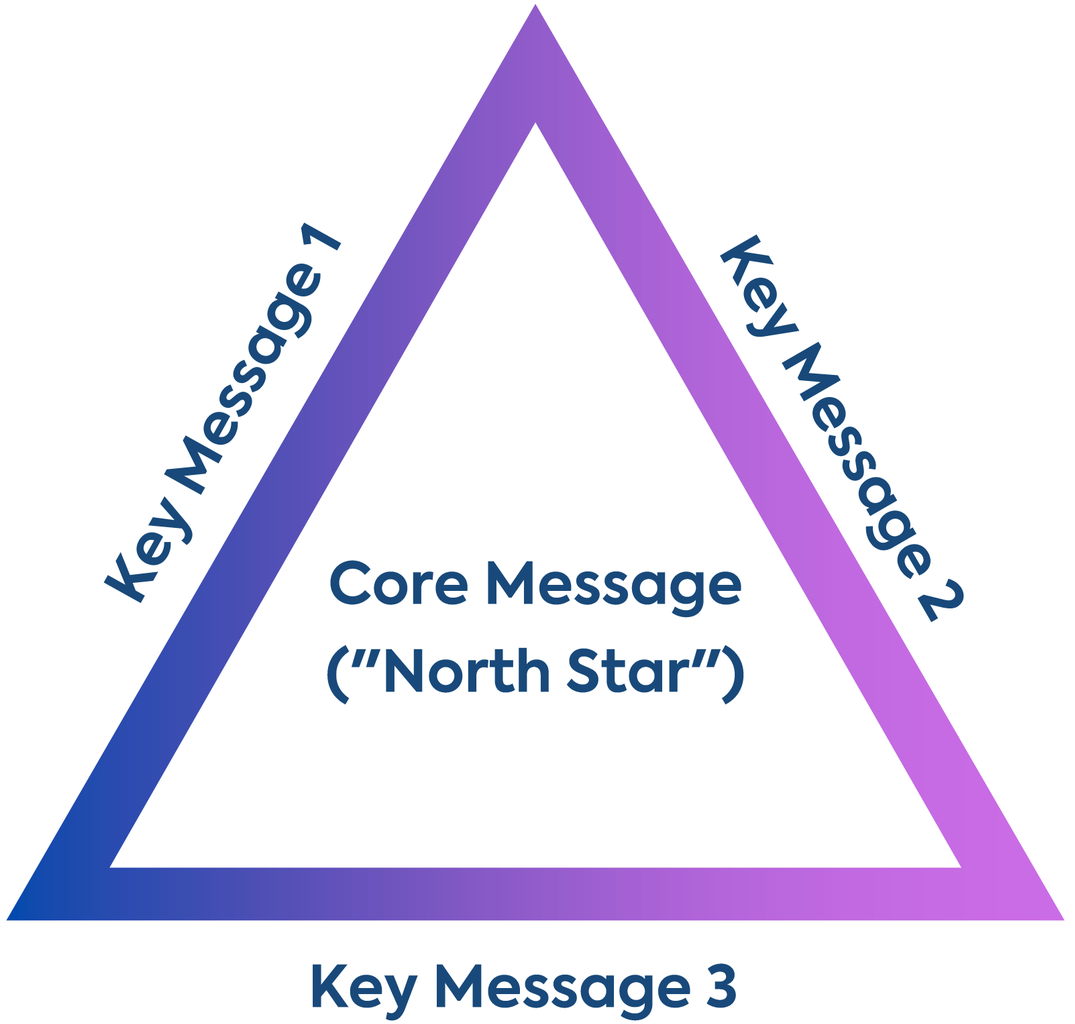
Avoid jargon and education speak.

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 should be designed to move your audience toward your objective.



Creating a Message Triangle to Tell Your District's Story

Review Key Questions

Review the Alliance for Resource Equity's Key Questions on High-Quality Early Learning:

- **Key Question 8.1:** Does each student have access to high-quality preschool programs?

Identify your "North Star" Core Message

Determine what you want to communicate. What is the underlying vision?

- Consider reiterating the Alliance for Resource Equity's vision:

Each student has access to high-quality preschool programs that meet their needs, so all students can reach high standards and thrive.

Support Your Messages With Data

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

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

Create a Call to Action

The last key message should prompt people to act.

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

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 % of students enrolled in the district's pre-K program by % students of color and socioeconomic demographics could help determine the answer to Key Question 8.1: **"Does each student have access to high-quality preschool programs?"**

2

Consider the available data points.
What story do they tell? How directly do they speak to the issue?
Let's suppose we learn that only 1 in 5 kindergarten students attended the district-run pre-K program. **We decide to use these data points to inform our key messages.**

3

Solidify the message.

- **Key Message 1 identifies the issue:** "Few kindergarteners attended the district-run pre-K program the prior year, and most students of color and students from low-income backgrounds did not attend any form of pre-K."
- **Key Message 2 explains why this matters:** "High-quality pre-K promotes a strong foundation for children during a period of rapid cognitive, social, and emotional development."
- **Key Message 3 advances a call to action:** "Our district must examine why so few students are attending the pre-K program, and analyze potential barriers that exist for students of color and from low-income backgrounds."

4

Use additional elements, as needed, with each of your key messages. For Key Message 1, this could look like:

- **An illustrative data metric:** "Only 1 in 5 kindergarten students attended the district-run pre-K program. Nearly half of the students of the students that did not attend are from low-income backgrounds and more than half are students of color."
- **A punchy soundbite to use for an interview:** "When so few of our students are able to attend the district-run pre-K program, there are likely significantly barriers at play."
- **A powerful narrative element:** Share how attending (or not attending) a pre-K program impacted a student's preparedness for kindergarten.

District X Example

Key Message 1

Few kindergarteners attended the district-run Pre-K program in the prior year, and most students of color and students from low-income backgrounds did not attend any form of pre-K.

DATA METRIC: Only 1 in 5 kindergarten students attended the district-run pre-K program. Nearly half of the students who did not attend are from low-income backgrounds and more than half are students of color.

SOUNDBITE: "When so few of our students are able to attend the district-run pre-K program, there are likely significantly barriers at play."

NARRATIVE: Share how attending (or not attending) a pre-K program impacted a student's preparedness for kindergarten.

Core Message ("North Star")

Each student has access to high-quality preschool programs that meet their needs, so all students can reach high standards and thrive.

Key Message 2

High-quality pre-K promotes a strong foundation for children during a period of rapid cognitive, social, and emotional development.

DATA METRIC: Studies indicate that attending a high-quality preschool program can help prepare children for school academically, socially, and emotionally — especially students from low-income backgrounds.

SOUNDBITE: "Pre-K programs represent our first opportunity to invest in our students, their academic success, and their future."

NARRATIVE: Share how investments in pre-K programs strengthen the community.

Key Message 3

Our district must examine why so few students are attending the pre-K program and analyze potential barriers that exist for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds.

DATA METRIC: Young children of color and children from low-income backgrounds are disproportionally shut out of high-quality learning opportunities, which can have a cascading effect throughout their K-12 education and beyond.

SOUNDBITE: "The children who could benefit most from high-quality preschool are least likely to be enrolled."

NARRATIVE: Ask the district to examine and address access barriers to pre-K.

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 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 in 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 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 guessing the future, reiterate the information you know and your key message.
- **Irrelevant Question:** Use a bridging statement to connect back to your key 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..."

BRIDGING STATEMENT

Question/concern that …

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

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

We need to be focusing our attention within K-12 systems. Investments in early learning opportunities distract us from where our students need support.	I think it would be more accurate to recognize the importance of both K-12 and early learning opportunities.	If states want to close opportunity gaps (which are already wide when students enter the K-12 system) for children of color, children from low-income families, children with disabilities, and English learners, we need to start earlier. The first 5 years before students enter the K-12 system are a crucial time when children are rapidly growing and building social, emotional, and academic skills that they will use for years to come. We must invest in early learning (and the early education workforce) so that all children can have access to a strong start and build a foundation for strong K-12 experiences.
The benefits of preschool programs often fade out over time. Why would we invest in these programs if they do not have a long-term impact?	I feel compelled to underscore the importance of *high-quality programs* in this conversation. This is because…	If we want to see a long-term return on investment, we need to invest in quality preschool programs that prepare children to succeed in kindergarten. Preschool must be followed by quality instruction in kindergarten and elementary school.
Young children should be home with a parent. It's not the government's role to intervene during this period or incentivize another option.	If we look at what's currently the case in our community…	Most children are being raised in households where parents work outside of the home. Child care is currently too expensive and should be more accessible to families who need it. Providing optional preschool is not a government take-over of early learning; rather, it's meeting the real needs of children and families, while also investing in children's future learning and growth.

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 uses asset-framing.
- Each key message speaks to the core message in the center of the 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.
- Push for better data transparency using this message triangle.
- 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 of leaders and systems, emphasizing systems-level action and does not place blame or fault on 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 high-quality early learning 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

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6. Gillespie, C. (2019). *"Young Learners, Missed Opportunities: Ensuring That Black and Latino Children Have Access to High-Quality State-Funded Preschool."* The Education Trust. https://edtrust.org/resource/young-learners-missed-opportunities/

7. Ibid.

8. Nores, M., Barnett, S. (2014). *"Access to High Quality Early Care and Education: Readiness and Opportunity Gaps in America."* CEELO & NIEER Policy Report. Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes and National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED555707

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10. Gillespie, C. (2019).

11. The Hunt Institute, The Education Trust, The Century Foundation, and Educational Alliance's Manny Cantor Center with support from Trust for Learning. (2022).

12. Ibid

13. Ibid.

Key Question	Data Metric	Data Notes	Data Source
Key Question 8.1 Does each student have access to high-quality preschool programs?	• Total percentage of students enrolled in pre-K program • Percentage of students enrolled in pre-K program, disaggregated by race/ethnicity and economic status.	Compare pre-K enrollment to 1st-grade enrollment (size, race/ethnicity, economic status).	Urban Institute/NCES

YOUR DISTRICT:

Key Message 1

DATA METRIC:

SOUNDBITE:

NARRATIVE:

Core Message ("North Star")

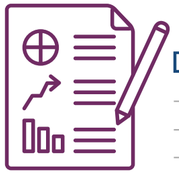
Key Message 2

DATA METRIC:

SOUNDBITE:

NARRATIVE:

Key Message 3



DATA METRIC:

SOUNDBITE:

NARRATIVE: