Your voice is important, and a necessary part of conversations on resource equity. The following slides will help you leverage your story and your community's data to “make the case” for equitable school funding. The slides are broken down into three sections:

- Issue & Impact
- Building Your Message
- Dismantling Opposition

The next two slides will provide further background information and data on school funding, and its impact on students. Consider utilizing these national trends as important context as you begin to craft your own local message on the slides immediately following these two. This information may also be helpful to refer back to as you consider ways to dismantle opposition, as discussed later in the slide deck.

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

- When it comes to providing children with a high-quality education, money matters.
- Funding is crucial in education as it directly impacts the quality and accessibility of educational resources, such as well-qualified teachers and support staff, modern facilities, and up-to-date, standards-aligned learning materials. Adequate financial support is the first step to ensure schools can create an environment conducive to effective teaching and learning.

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

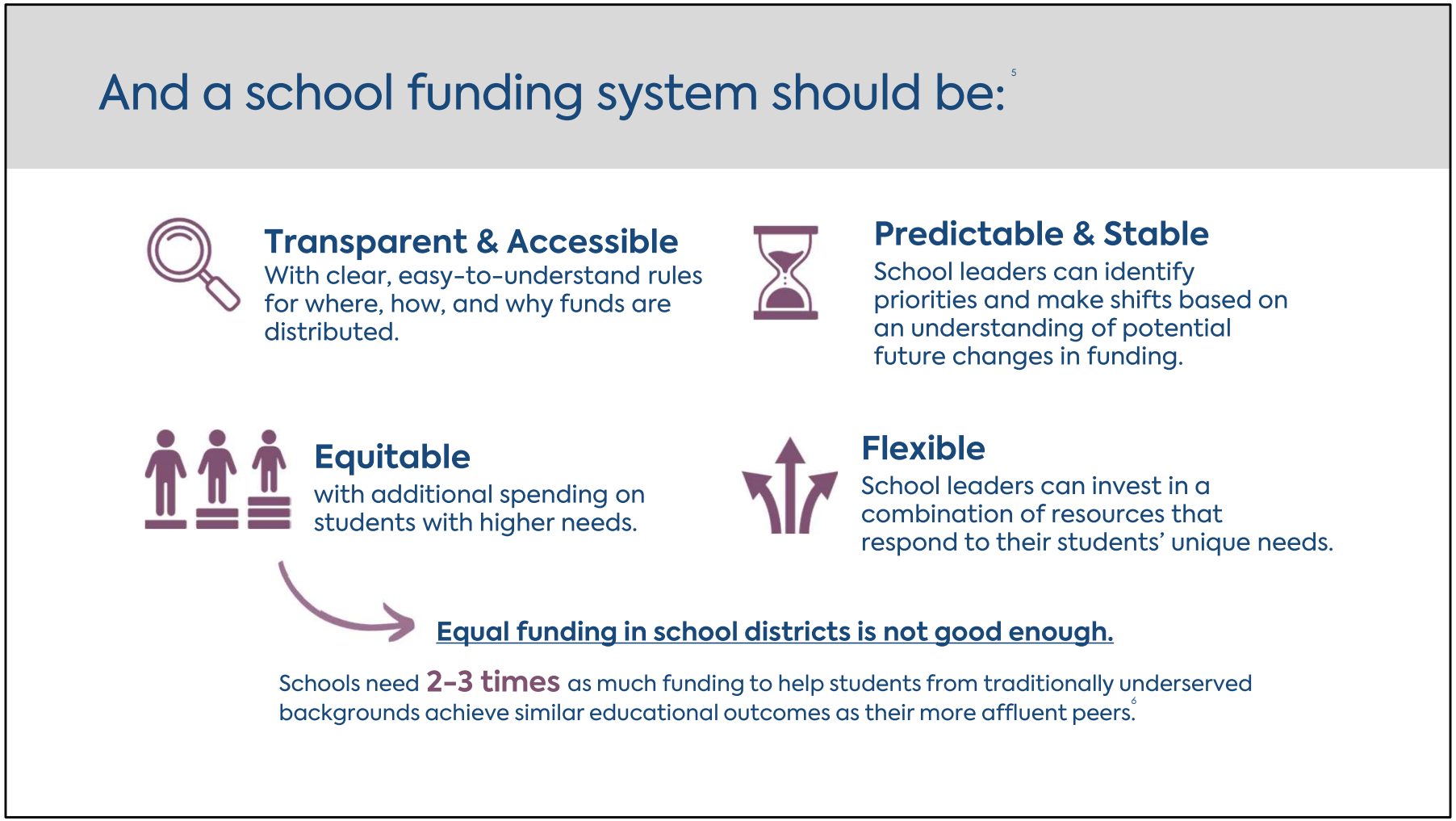
Sustained and significant increases in school funding have far-reaching, long-term benefits too, especially for students from low-income backgrounds:[4]

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

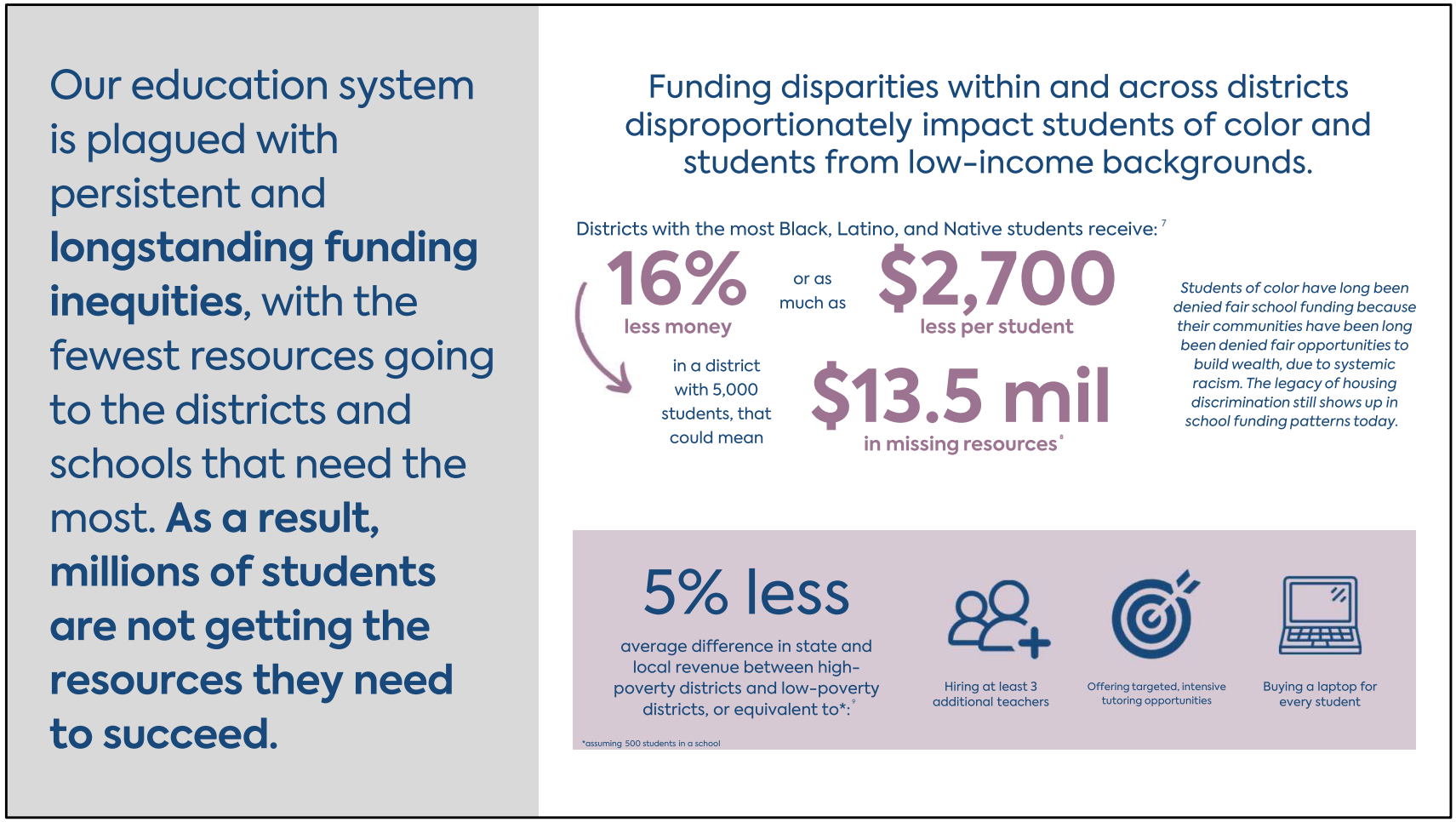
Increase college enrollment among students, as well as the level of education students complete.

Reduce poverty in adulthood and increase wages.

Equitable funding systems based on student need is essential for addressing educational disparities by ensuring that resources are allocated according to specific community needs and allowing schools to tailor interventions and support services to their unique context, and increased school funding leads to improved outcomes for students. These investments yield the greatest return for students from low-income backgrounds.

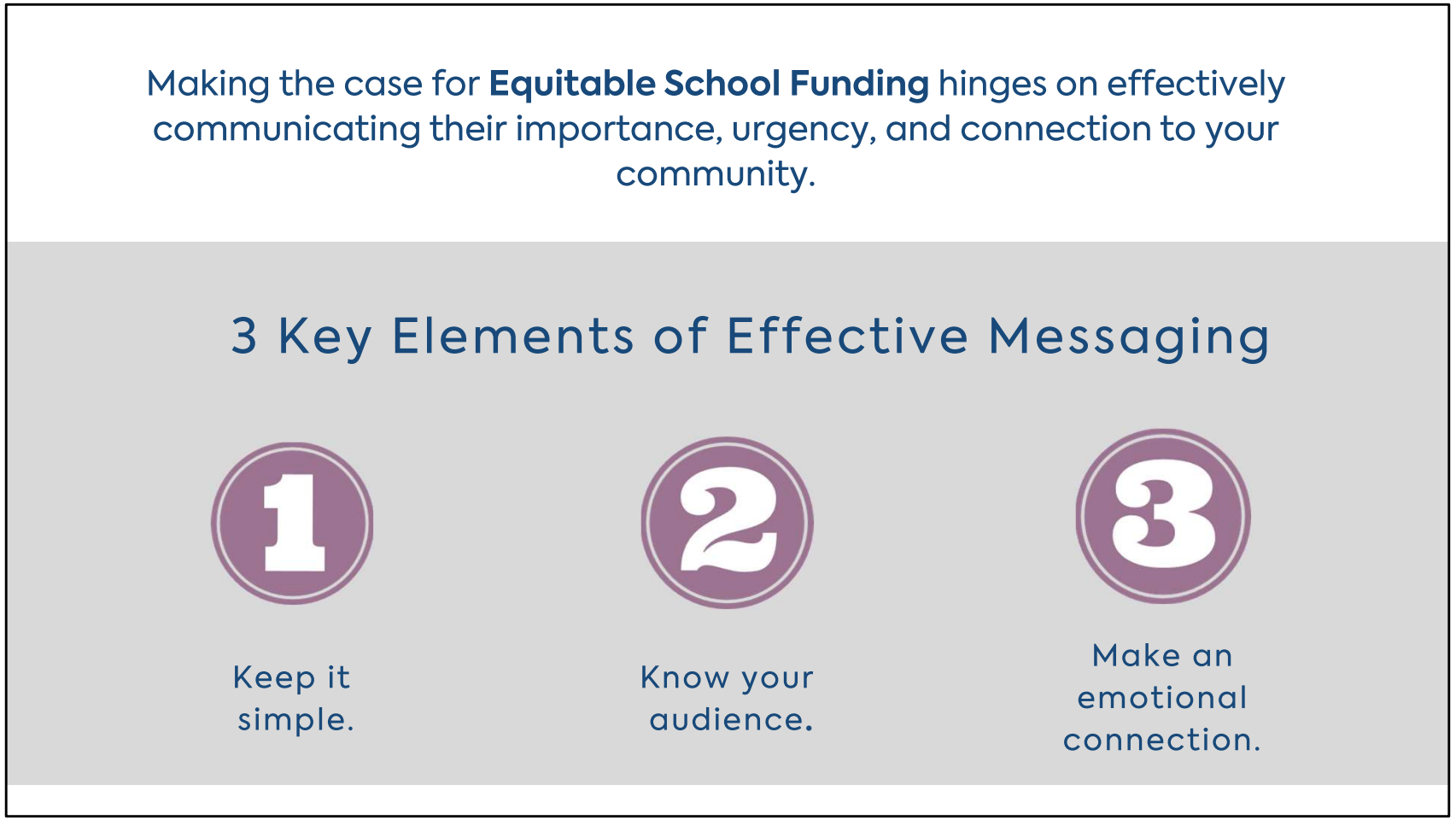


School funding systems that provide more funding — not equal, and certainly not less — to meet the needs of underserved students, such as students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and English learners, will allow each student to have the resources and supports they need to thrive.

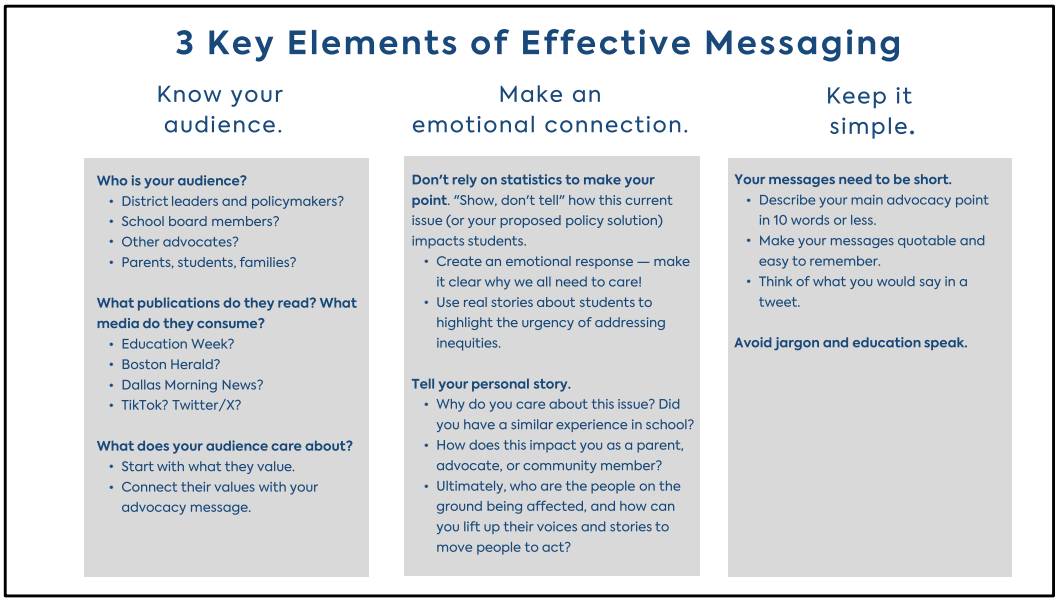


- Inequities in funding are foundational to all sorts of other inequities in our schools. Yet as a nation, we continue to spend less on educating our low-income students and students of color — the very students who could benefit most from additional support in their schools.

- Across the country, high-poverty districts and districts with the most students of color receive substantially less state and local revenue than low-poverty districts and districts with the fewest students of color. Districts with the most English learners also receive significantly less state and local revenue, compared with districts with the fewest English learners.



The following slides will help you build an effective message for more equitable school funding in your community. All effective messages have 3 key components. Adhering to these components is by no means easy given the complexity of resource equity work, but the more you can do so, the larger an impact your message is likely to have. These 3 components are: keeping it simple, knowing your audience, and making an emotional connection. The next slide will explain each in more detail.



1. Knowing your Audience

- While it may be tempting to label "everyone" as your audience, the more personalized you can make your message, the more likely it will be to have an impact. Once you've identified your specific audience, consider their values or what they cares deeply about, keeping in mind that this will likely differ from what you value most. Then, connect your message to your audiences' values and priorities.

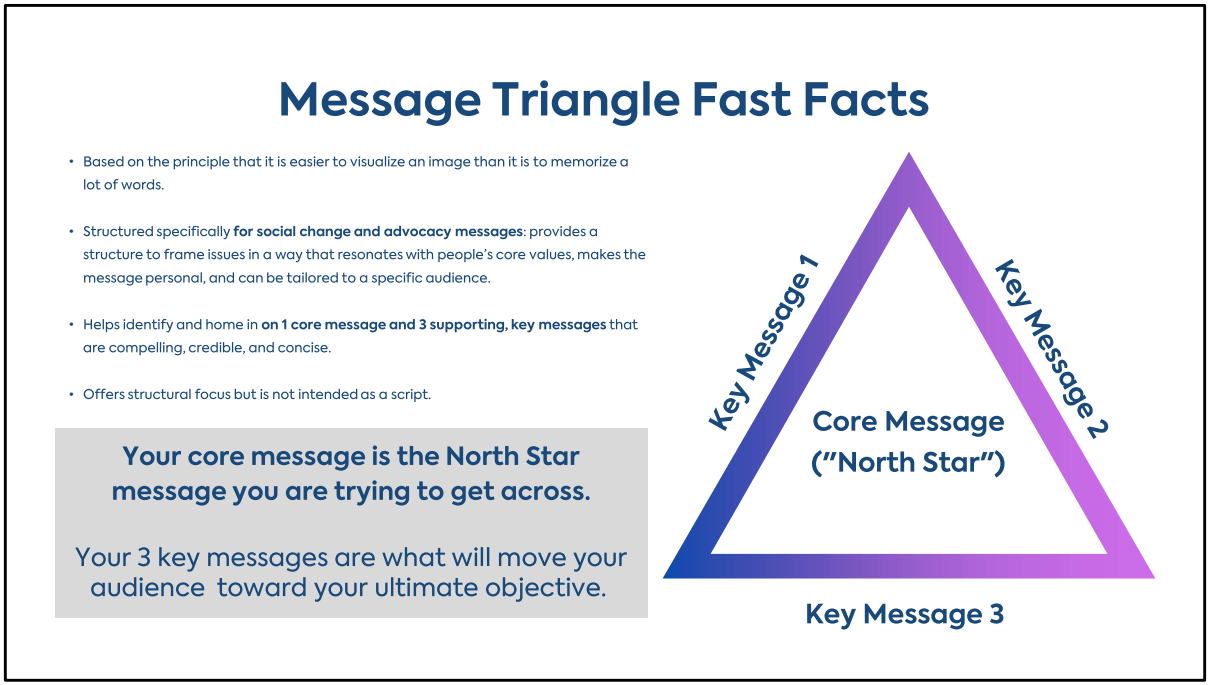
- Once you have your message, share it in places your audience frequents. Look for news outlets that cater to specific stakeholders, or public events your audience attends. Establishing trust is imperative for this strategy to be effective. Your audience will only listen to your message if they a) receive it and b) trust you as a reliable and accurate source of information.

2. Make an Emotional Connection

- People respond to emotion and passion, so use it in your messaging! The more personal and local you can make the issue, the more likely your audience will be to act. Stories are one of the most effective ways to do this. Often the most powerful stories come from the people most affected by the issue itself – in this case children and families. When asking these stakeholders to share their stories, make the process as easy as possible for them by offering training and removing barriers to participation like transportation and childcare. Offering multiple modes through which stakeholders can share their story, such as virtual or written options, is also helpful when feasible.

3. Keep It Simple

- Your audience can't act on your message if they don't understand what you're asking of them. Your messaging should be simple, concise, and easy to understand. This means avoiding any language that requires advanced knowledge of the education field and being clear from the start about what you are asking your audience to do. It also means being consistent in your messaging over time and across coalitions to avoid confusing your targets.



The Message Triangle is one useful strategy for structuring your messaging. It distinguishes between two types of messages - "core" and "key" messages, which are outlined below. When building your Message Triangle, use asset framing to ensure you are placing the blame for inequity on systems and structures, instead of students or communities.

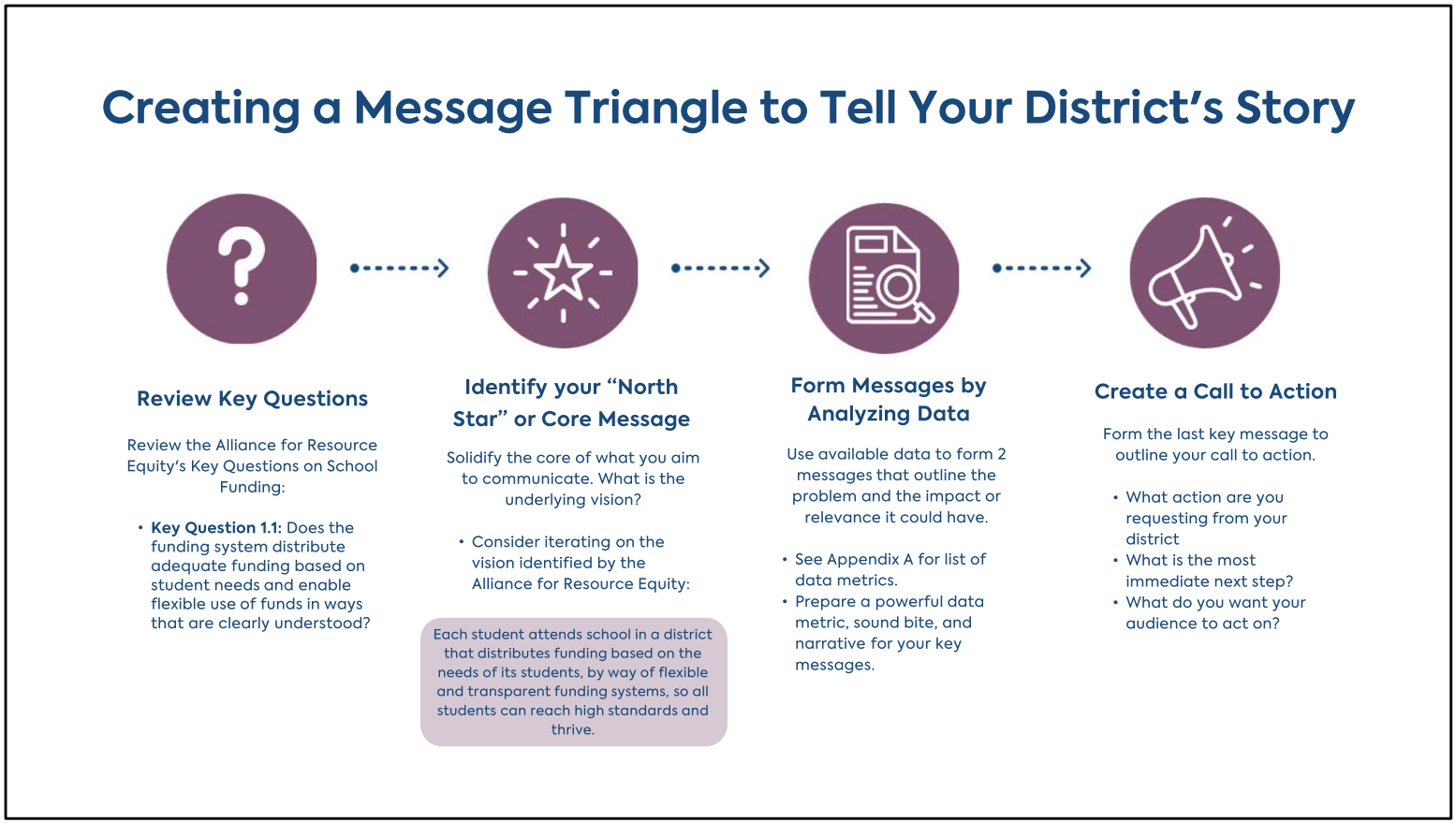
- **The Core Message:** The "Core Message" or "North Star" is your main point, goal, or value that you want to communicate to your audience. It drives all other messaging for your audience and is the message that, if nothing else, you want your audience to walk away remembering. If the message triangle is an essay, the core message serves as the essay's thesis.

- **The Key Messages:** There are three "Key Messages" in every Message Triangle, each of which intentionally build off one another to drive your audience to support and take action towards your main goal (or Core Message).

    - The first Key Message identifies and establishes the issue affecting your community that you want your audience to address. It breaks down the federal, state, and/or local inequity you have identified so that your audience, who will likely not be as well versed on the issue as you, has a full understanding of the topic you will go on to discuss.

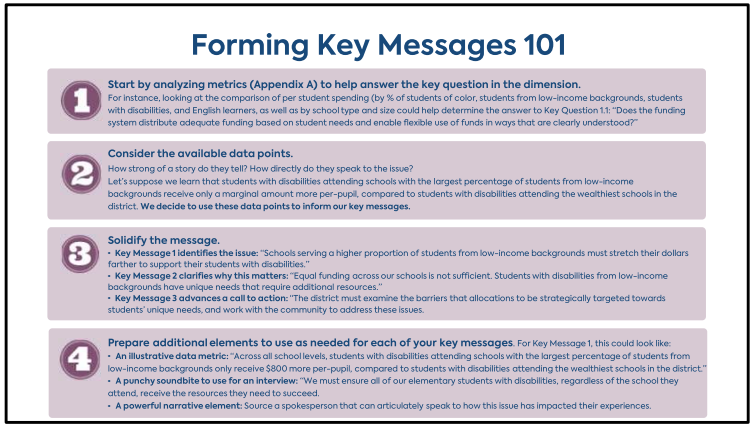
    - The second Key Message showcases the impact of this issue, either broadly or on your specific community, and how addressing it will have a positive impact on students in your area. In doing so, the second Key Message demonstrates why your audience should care about the issue you have raised, and why they should act now to address it.

    - The third Key Message is your call to action, prompting your audience to act in service of your goal. It explains exactly what you want your audience to do about the issue you have brought to their attention.



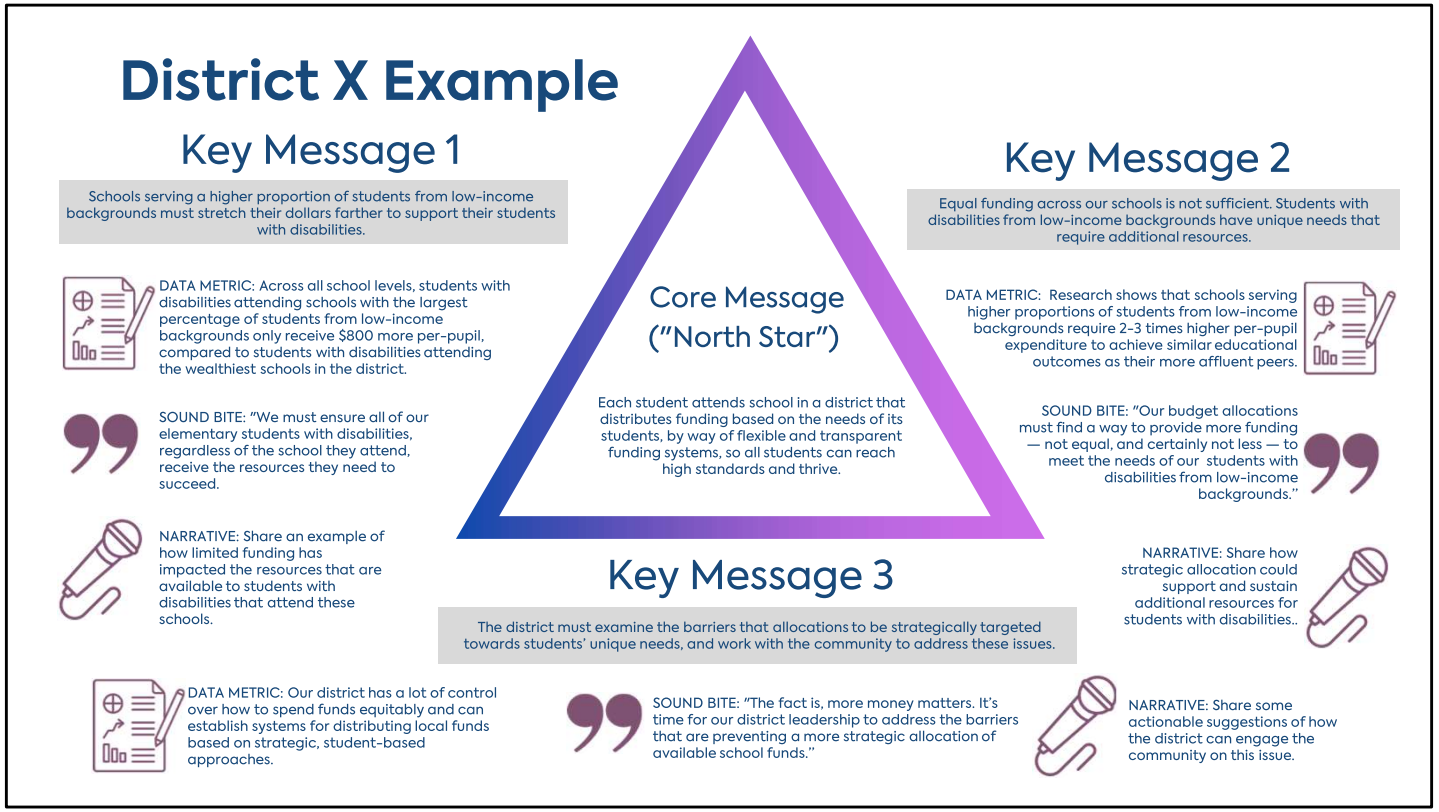
- Now that you know what a Message Triangle is, how do you create one? Start by reviewing the Alliance for Resource Equity's Key Questions on school funding to ensure you have considered all facets of school funding. You can also turn to the School Funding Section of the Education Combination (pgs. 8-10) for more information. Then, develop a goal or vision for your work. This overarching vision will become your Core Message – a succinct but comprehensive description of what it is you are advocating for and why.

- You can then move on to developing your Key Messages. To do so, first look at available data, such as Edunomics Lab's National Education Resource Database on Schools (NERDs), in order to develop a thorough understanding of school funding in your community. Appendix A provides additional suggestions for data sources to explore. Then use your findings to craft your first two Key Messages, which define the scope and impact of the problem on your community. Build off these to create your third Key Message – your call to action – which tells your audience what to do in response to the problem you've identified. More information on drafting Key Messages can be found in the following slide.



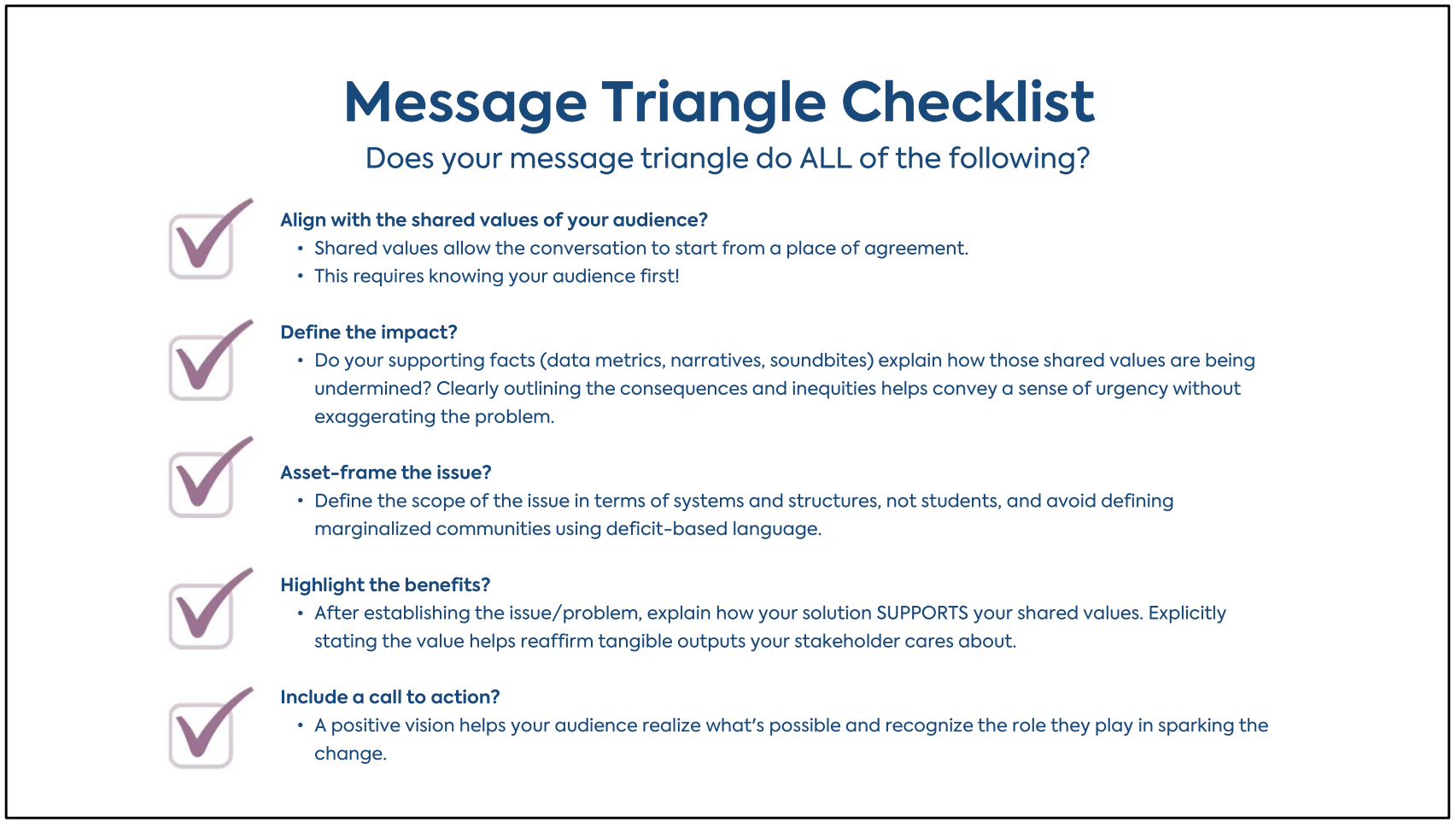
This slide provides an example for the 3rd step from the previous slide: Forming Key Messages. As a reminder, these 3 Key Messages will form each side of your Message Triangle in the end!

- Step 1: First, consult Appendix A in this deck for suggested metrics and data sources that could help inform your message triangle. (You can also utilize district-specific data or materials you may have access to, or if you previously completed the Resource Equity Diagnostic, you could refer back to those data sources.)
- Step 2: Let's imagine that the metric suggested in Appendix A reveals a significant finding: students with disabilities who attend schools with more low-income students don't get much more funding than students with disabilities who attend schools with wealthier students. You know this is a problem because lower-income students with disabilities will likely have greater needs that must be addressed by their school than students with disabilities who are wealthier, and this requires additional funds. Given this, you decide to use this data point to inform your Message Triangle, and later, you can reference it to help illustrate the issue.
- Step 3: It's now time for you to build your message! Now, you can go back and add more detail to each Key Message in the next step.
    - Key Message 1 states 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 identifies why the issue presented in the first Key Message matters. It answers the question of why your audience should care about this issue: "**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 presents a call to action to mobilize your audience. It answers the question of what you want my audience to do about it: "**The district must examine the barriers that prevent allocations from being strategically targeted towards students' unique needs, and work with the community to address these issues**."
- Step 4: Return to each Key Message to add some supporting information.
    - Preparing an illustrative data metric, a punchy soundbite (a very brief, catchy statement intended to capture interest of audience and ideal for a media quote) , and a powerful narrative element (personal story, anecdote of a child's experience, etc.) can help you be ready when the right opportunities arise to leverage them.
        - See FAQ's (Slide 15) for more information on what makes for a compelling soundbite and effective narrative element.
        - You'll use the data metric, soundbite, and narrative element in the ways that will be most powerful to the specific audience you're engaging with. For instance, you may be likely to use soundbites when engaging with the media, share a personal story when in conversation with other advocates, and a data metric with district leaders.
        - Make sure the data metrics you are preparing are easily understood and explained in a straightforward manner.



- This is an example of a completed Message Triangle on school funding. Notice the presence of a data metric, soundbite, and narrative under each of the key messages presented here. As discussed above, these different methods of communicating can be useful for ensuring your message "lands" with different audiences. It is up to you to determine what method (or combination of methods) will work best for your audience. For example, if you were using the message triangle here to make the case for a more diverse teacher workforce to your school board, you might first present Key Message 1 as a data metric to describe the overall issue to the school board. You might then choose to present Key Message 2 as a narrative to exemplify how the lack of a diverse teacher workforce impacts the experiences of many students in the district, bringing the statistic shared in Key Message 1 into clearer focus with a tangible and personal story with Key Message 2. Finally, you might close with a soundbite for Key Message 3 to leave the school board with a clear call to action that sticks in their minds.

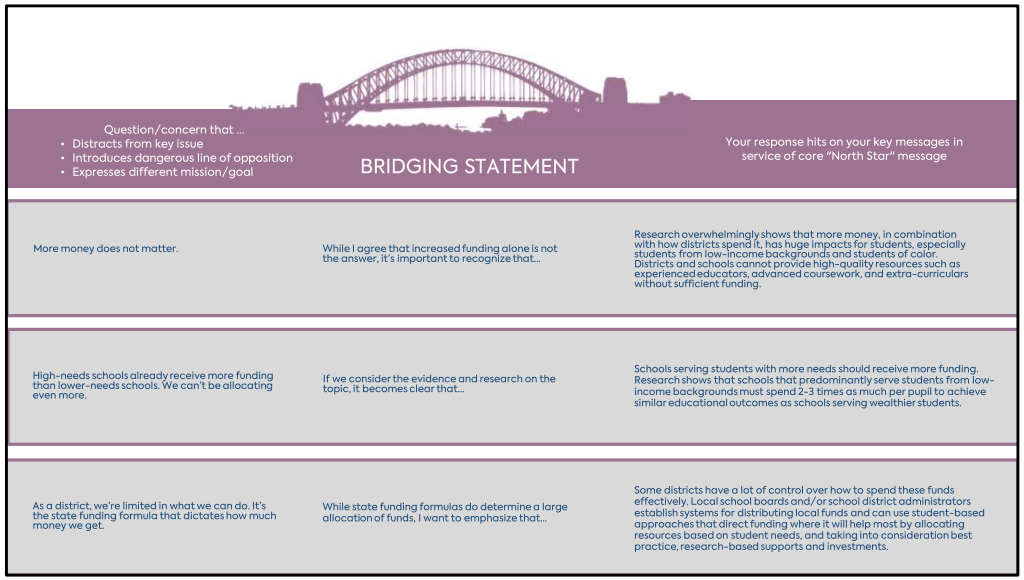
- It is important to note that, while the Message Triangle is a powerful tool for visualizing your goal and all the arguments you can make to get there, it is not prescriptive. We encourage you to view the Message Triangle as a jumping off point; used to further refine your own messaging and tailor it to the needs of your community and the values of your audience.



- Use this checklist to ensure your message triangle meets all the suggested criteria. Adjust as necessary.
- This is the last step in this section of the deck, Constructing Your Messaging. The next section discusses how to dismantle opposition.
- For more information on asset-based framing, see Slide 15 (FAQs).

- It is inevitable that you will face criticism when presenting your message. The following slides will help you respond to criticism and focus attention back on your message. There are three main types of criticism: Bad Information, Speculation, and Irrelevant Questions. This slide offers best practices when responding to each.

- One tactic that is useful in responding to any type of criticism is bridging statements. These statements create a bridge between the opposition's argument and your own. Their goal is to bring the conversation back to, and therefore reinforce, your own points. When using a bridging statement, it is important to never reiterate the opposing argument. Instead, briefly acknowledge that your opposition's point was shared, before using a bridging statement to connect back to your messaging.



- This slide identifies some of the opposing narratives you may encounter, and how to use the bridging statement format to bring the conversation back to a place where you can emphasize your own messaging.

- For example, the misguided-yet-popular belief that districts have no power over school funding, and that it is the state that has sole control over funding decisions. As a suggested response to this opposition, advocates can use the bridging statement in the middle column to first, recognize that states do have tremendous power in school funding, and second, clarify that states are not the only governing body with power over school funding decisions, and that the district has a powerful role to play in equitably distributing the funding it receives from the state. This bridge allows advocates to then further dismantle the opposing claim in a manner that reinforces the imperative for districts to more equitably distribute funding to schools based on student need.

- These examples are intended to be representative in nature: they reflect the broad lines of opposition that advocates may often hear when engaging on this issue. However, it's important to note that opposing narratives might be framed differently as presented on this slide. When this is the case, you may still be able to use a bridging statement and response that is similar to what is presented on this slide. For instance:

    - You may encounter opposition that sounds like: "We don't have enough money in the budget right now to increase funding for higher-needs schools. We can return to this discussion if we are allocated additional funds."

    - While this does not explicitly mention the role of the state in allocating funds, it expresses a similar core claim: Because the district **does not have power over** its total budget, this justifies **de-prioritizing the importance** of allocating the funds it does have equitably. Therefore, you could use the same general arguments as listed under the third example in this slide, even though the original opposing message is not identical.

We hope this resource acts as either a culmination of – or a jumping off point to – several additional resource equity conversations. Additional resources in the Alliance for Resource Equity toolkit can aid in these discussions:

- Want a primer on what resource equity means?
  - It's important to begin with a solid understanding of why resource equity is a necessary frame to consider how schools are providing supports to all students to learn and thrive. Review the Education Combination to break it down.

- Not sure which dimension of resource equity should be the focus of your message?
  - Use our Resource Equity Diagnostic and Tools to identify opportunities in all 10 dimensions of resource equity to improve equity and excellence.

- Not sure who your audience should be to craft your message around?
  - Your audience influences how to effectively develop your message. Use our Advocating Across Government Guides to help clarify various levels of education authority and governance.

- Not sure what to specifically ask your district (and/or other decisionmakers) in the call to action?
  - Our Guidebooks, specific to each Dimension of Resource Equity, explores underlying causes and the potential actions based on underlying challenges.
  - The dimension-specific Diagnostic Blueprints break down the types of analyses that districts can conduct to learn more about resource equity in their district and includes a DIY Analysis Tool for districts to input and analyze their own data.
  - Propose using the sample meeting agenda to structure additional conversations with your district about resource equity.

- If you are interested in learning more about asset-based framing, you may find the following resources helpful:
  - Video series about "The Power of Asset Framing"
  - Blog about "The Power of Asset-Based Language"
  - Blog about "Asset Framing: The Harder Data Work"

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.
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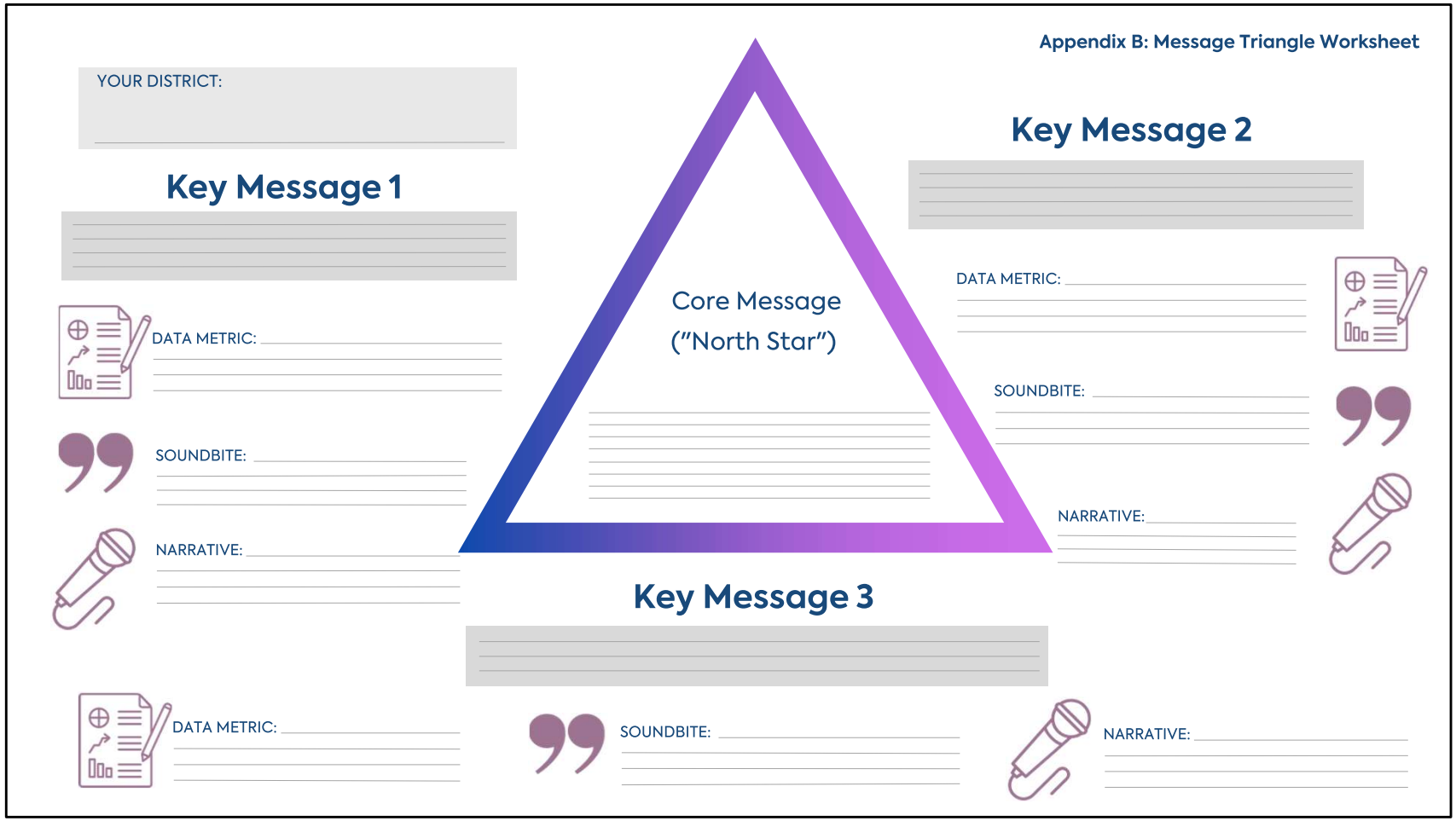
6. Duncombe, W., Yinger, J. (2004). "How Much More Does a Disadvantaged Student Cost?" Center for Policy Research. 103. https://surface.syr.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1102&context=cpr; Baker, B., Weber, M., Srikanth, A., Kim, R., Atzbi, M. (2018). "The Real Shame of the Nation." Rutgers University, 2018. http://www.shankerinstitute.org/sites/ shanker/files/The%20Real%20Shame%20of%20the%20 Nation.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.

Appendix A: Data Resources Chart

Key Question	Data Metric	Data Source
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?	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).	• 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.

Use this chart to identify data metrics useful to informing your key message(s), in addition to your own knowledge about what is happening in your community. Refer to the slide on how to form key messages for more information.



Use this slide to complete your own message triangle!