NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

The DEI Doctrine: How Suburban Schools Interpret Inequality

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Field of Sociology

By

Emily Handsman

EVANSTON, ILLINOIS

September 2022

Abstract

This dissertation analyzes how suburban school districts made sense of and planned to reduce inequality between 2019–2021. Previous literature has found that suburban schools, despite their reputation as the best in the country, are deeply unequal (Lewis and Diamond 2015; Lewis-McCoy 2014). Building on this previous scholarship, I ask: How did suburban school personnel interpret their role in responding to inequality? The time period included in this project includes the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the police murder of George Floyd, both of which caused significant disruption to suburban school districts. To address this, I ask: How did the events of 2020 change the way suburban school personnel interpreted their role in responding to inequality? To answer these questions, I use interviews, documents, and ethnographic data from three school districts outside of Philadelphia, in addition to a broader sample of documents from the 60 surrounding school districts. I find that even before diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts were invigorated in 2020, suburban school districts had a blueprint for interpreting inequality that I call the DEI Doctrine. This doctrine consists of three tenets:

1. Schools, school districts, and their workers have a professional responsibility to work to fix inequality AND to educate students about broader social inequalities;
2. DEI initiatives focus on creating representational diversity to the exclusion of other potential equity goals; and
3. DEI initiatives are nonpartisan and able to exist in communion with districts' commitment to political neutrality.

Next, I find that overall, this doctrine *absorbed the shocks* of 2020, guiding school districts as they navigated these difficult times. In order to analyze these tenets and disruptions, I rely on a

combination of ideas from institutional theory, the sociology of education, the sociology of race and racism, the sociology of culture, and political sociology. In the end, this dissertation makes contributions to scholarly understandings of institutional myths, racial ideology, political neutrality in schools, and the effects of disruptions on school districts.

Acknowledgment

This dissertation project would not have been possible without the generosity of the administrators and teachers at Carver, Jefferson, and Glory school districts, many of whom spent hours speaking with me during some of the most chaotic moments of their careers as educators. Additionally, I owe great thanks to several student research assistants who helped considerably with data collection: Olivia Hernandez, Ariana van Dyck, Kaitlyn Stajura, Grayson Willenbacher, and Hugh-Jay Yu. I'd also like to thank all of my former students, all the way from Bethune Elementary/Middle School in Detroit to graduate students at Northwestern. Special thanks to my 2YP students this past winter—working with you was the highlight of a difficult season for me. Dissertations are difficult to write, and I thank the concept of backwards planning (which I learned as a teacher), the Pomodoro method (thanks, Francisco Cirillo!), bullet journaling, diaphragmatic breathing, running (and cycling post-injury), Khruangbin's album "Con Todo el Mundo," and the program Scrivener for my ability to manage time, organize work, and focus in ways I never would have thought possible a decade ago.

Despite these tools, I was only able to finish this dissertation thanks to the support, guidance, empathy, tough love, and confidence of many people in my present and past. This is a dissertation about education, and I would be remiss if I didn't thank the many incredible educators that have helped me get to this point. I have been extremely lucky to have teachers and mentors who have given me the space and encouragement necessary to embrace my passions, no matter how odd they seemed. The question at the root of this dissertation is one I began thinking about my senior year of high school, when I was fortunate to participate in an interdisciplinary course called "Literature of Social Comment." This course included a capstone project, and my project, titled "Middle School Lessons on Hate," was the first iteration of this project, albeit in

very different form. A special thank you to Dr. Adriene Pierce who kindled my passion for social justice, guided that project, and guided *me* through the turbulent high school years with care. Without her faith in me, I would not be where or who I am today. In college, my passion projects took a different turn, and I owe a great debt of thanks to Timea Szell, Ross Hamilton, and Saskia Hamilton who allowed me to write a senior thesis about encyclopedias in 26 alphabetical sections, with a poem for each. While this dissertation doesn't follow that unique structure, the lessons I learned about nimble thinking, creativity, and analytic rigor made it possible for me to imagine (and then re-imagine, thanks to the pandemic) the structure of this project. When I approached these college mentors (all English professors) and told them I wanted to be a sociologist, they were all supportive of the idea, which made it seem like a real possibility. I owe another great thanks to both Debra Minkoff and Karen Barkey, who offered advice on graduate school and generously read my application materials even though they hadn't had me as an undergraduate student.

At Northwestern, I have been fortunate to have guidance and support from many faculty members, most notably my fantastic committee: Mary Pattillo, Anthony Chen, Wendy Griswold, Simone Ispa Landa, and Lincoln Quillian. I am so grateful for your support over these years. Additional thanks to Caitlin Farrell and Cynthia Coburn, whose lessons about qualitative data analysis greatly aided this project, as well as to: Jeannette Colyvas, Leslie McCall, Susan Thistle, Jeff Guhin, and Diane Schazenbach for support along the way. Thank you to: Murielle Harris, Ryan Sawicki, Linda Remaker, Princess Rosado, Tom Winters, and Kadir Castellanos. I absolutely could not have completed this degree without your expert guidance through the quagmires of administrative work.

Throughout my time in graduate school, I've been lucky to have friendship and support from many fellow (and former) grad students: Anna Michelson, Mallory Fallin, Omri Tubi, Jun Fang, Erica Banks, Robin Bartram, Jane Pryma, Alka Menon, Marcel Knudson, Ari Tolman, Erik Lovell, Josh Basseches, Naomi Blaushild, and Jordan Conwell: thank you. I also wish to thank members of the Culture Workshop and Simone Ispa Landa's lab for community and feedback on many of these ideas. Special thanks to Anna Michelson for being the best writing buddy and to Omri Tubi for calling whenever my texts sounded too panicky. I have also been lucky to have an amazing friend and colleague in fellow suburban education scholar Nadirah Farah Foley, whose thoughtful feedback and advice has made an enormous difference in the last few years of my graduate school journey.

I also owe many thanks to friends, chosen family, and community outside of the graduate school orbit. Allison Grossman, there's no one I would rather have synced lives with. I'm so grateful we've been able to support each other on this journey, and I plan to continue this ad infinitum. Chelsea Espinoza and Caitlin Hamrin, thank you for checking in on me multiple times a week through the job market and dissertation process, even when the news was grim and grimmer. Veda Kumarjiguda, thank you for endlessly and ferociously believing in me, even when I doubted myself. You're the best g-chat coworker a dissertator could ask for. Thank you to Carley Balazs for having seemingly endless faith in me, Kathy Bates for encouragement and graphic design assistance, and Natalie Thompson for both general support and specific commiseration around health issues: The group chat kept me relatively sane. Thanks for always being on my side—PLSR really is forever. Bri Sanders and Shannon Wilson, thank you for immense empathy and support over this last year. Thank you to many others — especially Samantha Meysohn, Nate Shalev, Erin Rainey, Tamarah Balazs — for your friendship and

support at various points of the dissertation years. Thanks to the wonderful folks at Lynch Physical Therapy, Ana Hagstrand, Naomi Anurag Lahiri, Maria Hwang, Hyman Ng, and Jessica Bricker, for keeping me relatively healthy through this journey.

I have also been lucky to receive immense support from my family. Thanks to my many aunts, uncles, and cousins both by blood and by bond: the Handsmans, Golubs, Formans, Banners, Benders, Alice Joselow, and Mona Lau. Thank you to my sister and friend, Rebecca Handsman, for encouragement, support, and number crunching. You're up next! Thank you to my parents for putting my education first and for encouraging me throughout these seven years. Particular thanks to my dad for telling me the harrowing story of getting his first job after law school approximately three times a week, and particular thanks to my mom for instilling in me a passion for schools and teaching. Thank you to Sage for teaching me the joy of pet ownership and to Prince for endless affection. Finally, the biggest thanks to Niamba Baskerville, whose organizational systems, humor, writing encouragement, and general support through this entire journey, and especially through this most difficult year, has kept me afloat.

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As a last note: graduate school is always difficult, but this final hurdle has been uniquely challenging. A month before my dissertation was due, my grandmother was hospitalized and passed away, and my parents and I got COVID-19 from our time at the hospital. Successfully completing this dissertation under these circumstances was a huge feat, and one I absolutely could not have accomplished alone. Thank you to: Mary Pattillo for telling me that the work would get done; Caitlin Hamrin and Omri Tubi for making sure I had dinner while in hotel isolation; Mona Lau for delivering an incredible basket of COVID essentials to the hotel; my parents for being the best convalescing crew around; Niamba for picking me up once I tested

negative; and Carley, Caitlin, Chelsea, Veda, Ray, Jackson, Susan, and Rebecca for your support.

To Judy Handsman and to Sydelle Golub, two bold, tenacious, and fiercely intelligent women: I was blessed to learn from both of you for so many years. This work would not have been possible without your support, encouragement, and path carving, and so I dedicate it back to the both of you.

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation project tells a number of different stories—some are empirical, some are theoretical, and some are political. It tells the story of the similarities and differences between school districts in the suburbs of Philadelphia, especially in terms of how these districts go about understanding and work to fix inequality through diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. This, of course, was the story I set out to tell when proposing this project and beginning data collection and analysis.

However, what I could never have predicted going into this project is that discussions of DEI would suddenly take center stage across the United States right as a similarly unpredictable pandemic prolonged my data collection past the 2019–2020 school year. Thus, this project took a surprising turn, and I now have the opportunity to tell another story, one that looks at how these same school districts responded to crisis after crisis, how they amended the DEI initiatives they already had, and how they continued to respond to criticism from displeased parents, even as these critiques sharpened into more pointed political attacks. These various stories—comparisons between school districts, comparisons within school districts over time and crises, comparisons between school districts over time—are complex, and the findings do not make it easier to disentangle this narrative web. Rather than finding that each school district was unique in 2019, and then responded to the events of 2020 in a similarly unique fashion, I find that the districts have much more in common than they have differences. These similarities are cultural in nature, explained by shared institutional myths and values that predict districts' twin commitments to fixing inequality and to maintaining political neutrality as well as by a shared dominant racial ideology focused on diversity that in turn explains how these commitments result in DEI

initiatives focused on representational diversity and how they respond to challenges by reasserting neutrality.

As such, on the simplest level, this dissertation tells the story of how each of these three districts—Carver, Jefferson, and Glory—interpreted inequality between 2019–2021. It also tells an institutional story about myths, how they change or are reinvigorated during times of crisis, and how the tight or loose coupling configurations between these myths and on-the-ground practices both explain and are explained by the organizations' responses to crisis. It also tells a story about racial ideology because institutional myths do not exist in a vacuum but instead interact constantly with the dominant (and less dominant) racial ideologies or racial schemas that are themselves a blueprint for how individuals, groups, and organizations interpret inequality (especially racial inequality but also other forms of inequality). It also tells a story about shifting political norms because as these norms changed, they came into conflict with the districts' work on inequality. Finally—and perhaps both most importantly and most surprisingly—it tells a story about schooling practices in times of crisis. This is the story that is most familiar to everyone reading, as we have all lived through it. Eyebrows will not be raised reading about how school districts scrambled to respond to a call for DEI work, or antiracism work, in the summer of 2020, after finishing the most difficult school year in everyone's careers. No reader will be surprised by my descriptions of parents raging against these initiatives, weaponizing their opposition to what Fox News told them to call "critical race theory." It is my hope, however, that this empirical work provides substantial evidence for what we have all experienced over these years. Despite this lack of shock value, my hope is that my analysis of empirical data and the theoretical framework I build to aid me in this analysis helps shed light on the ways this crisis around schooling practices was boiling right under the surface, even before the events of 2020 made it

all come to light. I say this in terms of both the DEI initiatives that *were already in the works* before they were publicly demanded and the white parent backlash that was already simmering in the background.

In the summer of 2020, sparked by outrage over the police murder of George Floyd, it seemed that every organization—from giant banks to supermarkets to clothing stores—was asserting its commitment to antiracism, no matter how readily it still reproduced racism in its day-to-day money-making practices. This movement swept across the country, and schools were and have been an important center of debate. First it was a public doubling down on equity initiatives, then came the backlash that we have all become familiar with. Egged on by then-president Trump, Fox News, and other conservative media sources, parents expressed outrage over what they called "critical race theory" in schools, which really amounted to any curricular content about race. Whether it was purely focused on a neoliberal understanding of diversity or *actual* critical, progressive material did not seem to matter much to these irate white parents.

So why did the white, Republican backlash against this renewed focus on structural racism end up centering around schools? It is—at least in part—because schools themselves—and schooling as an institution—are a magnet for ideological and moral clashes in society (Labaree 2008; Hunter 2000; Vergari 2000). Nothing is quicker to boil people's blood than the question of how we treat children, a fact we have seen play out in fine form over the past few years of the pandemic. It is predictable, then, that a serious ideological conflict would find schools to be a primary battleground. While these clashes—over DEI initiatives, over teaching about race and racism in the classroom—might seem to be born out of the demands for racial justice and the reinvigoration of the Black Lives Matter movement in the summer of 2020, the seeds were planted for these clashes much earlier. In this dissertation, I demonstrate how even

before it was top of mind for the whole country, suburban school districts were developing what I call a "DEI Doctrine"—a set of rules that govern how they cope with and respond to inequality. Given the unique nature of my dataset, I am then able to demonstrate how this DEI Doctrine was put through a trial by fire as these districts coped with the multitude of crises cropping up between 2020–2022.

The DEI Doctrine consists of the following three tenets:

1. Schools, school districts, and their workers have a professional responsibility to work to fix inequality AND to educate students about broader social inequalities;
2. DEI initiatives focus on creating representational diversity to the exclusion of other potential equity goals; and
3. DEI initiatives are nonpartisan, and able to exist in communion with districts' commitment to political neutrality.

In the following three chapters, I explore this concept in depth, addressing the following general research question: How did suburban school personnel interpret their role in responding to inequality? The tenets of the DEI Doctrine build on one another, telling three distinct but interrelated stories. The first is a story about institutions—how and why organizational commitments are what they are, and how they unfold. Institutional theory helps explain why school districts are committed to solving inequality, and how this commitment is affected both by conflicts with other institutional commitments and by external disruptions/shocks to the system. The second is a story about structural inequality—what it *means* that institutions are committed to solving inequality. Institutional theory tells us the *how* but not the *what.* In order to understand this commitment, we need to understand how they conceptualize both inequality and equity. This is a question of meaning and meaning making, and it is a question well-served by

theories of race, racism, and antiracism. The third is a story about politics. Institutional theory tells us how districts' commitments work and describes how institutional commitments (or "myths") can sometimes conflict. In this case, the substance of districts' commitment to fixing inequality can come up against their commitment to political neutrality. Both commitments remain priorities for the districts; thus, negotiating the boundaries around what "counts" as political, especially during several moments of societal upheaval, is an essential piece of the puzzle to disentangle.

In addition to these three interlocking tenets, this dissertation tells one last story. This final story is about disruptions, moral panics, and change. While the institutional theory, structural racism, and political stories were embedded in the data starting in 2019, the events beginning in 2020 and continuing to the present have created significant shocks to *every* system. It is important, then, to consider these shocks theoretically, looking at how these significant moments of disruption did or did not affect the systems already in place (in this case, the DEI Doctrine). I include two chapters that address this story. In the first, I look at changing (or stable) institutional myths and then the way these commitments played out in terms of equity work. I find that institutional commitments are reaffirmed and not really changed. The districts do double down on their equity initiatives, sometimes starting new ones but oftentimes just making extant initiatives more public. These efforts range in their implementation, and I argue that this variation is due to extant organizational structures and school relationships with community members. In the second chapter, I look at the political backlash to these efforts, finding that the schools' commitment to political neutrality ended up undermining a lot of what they were trying to accomplish.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Schools, Suburbs, and Inequality

As a society, we hold a strong cultural belief in the connection between education and ongoing social inequality. Schools are often seen as "the great equalizer"—institutions that can pull people out of poverty and set them on the road to social mobility. This belief is not innate or inevitable. Instead, policies like the GI Bill and Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society programs made the connection between education and social inequality for us, arguing through their skills-centered programs that inequality in the United States was a problem that more education and thereby increased skills could solve (Kantor and Lowe 1995). This connection between education and inequality has served politicians well, allowing them to place the burden of solving inequality on schools in place of providing other social supports through a more robust welfare state. This connection has, as things tend to do, become common knowledge or common thought, permeating discussions of social problems in the United States for the last several decades. In the end, this has resulted in what David Labaree (2008) calls a tendency to "educationalize" our social problems—to force social problems to shape shift to fit into a school-shaped solution. As Labaree explains, schools are a public arena in which we can fight over ideologies, priorities, and values, and as such, they are a convenient institution upon which to hoist all of our pressing social problems.

In sum, the idea of public schooling in the United States has always been a political tool, from its first inception as an institution designed to assimilate students into American culture (Reese 2011). More recently, schools have been expected to solve inequality, and the idea of schooling has also become a *social* tool for blaming social problems and expecting appropriate solutions. In this way, schools are now expected to be an intervening institution, supposedly making up for any structural inequalities children face, and supposedly allowing all students

regardless of race and class to develop the skills they need to be financially successful. Research on schools reflects this expectation, as researchers often examine how schools mediate, reproduce, or challenge racial and socioeconomic inequality (e.g., Bowles and Gintis 1976; Carter 2012; Calarco 2014; Xie, Fang, and Shauman 2015; Grodsky, Warren, and Felts 2008; Domina, Penner, and Penner 2017; Tyson 2011; Lewis and Diamond 2015).

Additionally, schools have a second important role: socializing students into their place as citizens of the United States. While Labaree (1997) argued that schools are no longer focused on creating democratic citizens and are instead focused on social mobility, aspects of school like the contours of curricula, especially in English and history/social studies, *do* shape how students understand their roles in our deeply unequal society. Given the increased attention all organizations—and especially schools—have placed on DEI and antiracism in the last few decades, it makes sense that schools are not only considering the ways they can potentially improve students' social class through skills, but also considering what they teach students about structural inequalities existing outside and within school walls. This aspect of socialization plays a role in both social mobility and creating citizens who are prepared to participate in democracy (Allen 2016).

Given all this pressure, the people who work in schools—district administrators, school-level administrators, and teachers—certainly have their own understandings of the role schools should play in creating a "more perfect union," whether this role encompasses both skills and understandings of broader structures of inequality in society or just one or the other. After all, they operate this institution that is supposedly the greatest mechanism for social change that we as a society have in our arsenal. These people are experts in the goals and limits of schooling, and yet they—their beliefs, their opinions, and their conceptualizations of schooling—are often

not the focus of educational scholarship. How can we understand the role schools play and aspire to play in our society without a close look at how the people operating schools think about and understand these questions?

In this dissertation, I attempt to center teacher and administrator experiences with and constructions of inequality in schools in order to better understand how schools operate within their assigned role as a force for reducing inequality or creating equality in the United States. This in turn helps illustrate the complexities of working toward equity or equality in such a historically and intricately unequal society. In order to study this phenomenon, I turn my attention specifically to public schools in the suburbs.

For many years, suburban schools were seen as the educational exemplar. By both official measures like standardized test scores and unofficial measures like privileged parent whisper networks, these schools were the cream of the crop (Lareau and Calarco 2012). As such, parents chose to move to suburbia primarily for access to these high-quality institutions, and, for many years, educational researchers and policymakers turned their attention away from these institutions in favor of studying schools perceived as having greater need (Diamond and Posey-Maddox 2020). However, in recent years, researchers (e.g., Lewis and Diamond 2015; Lewis-McCoy 2014) have found that while promoting a facade of academic excellence, suburban school districts often clandestinely reproduce racial and socioeconomic inequality. This inequality has become even more apparent as suburbs, and thereby suburban schools, become increasingly racially and socioeconomically diverse (Diamond and Posey-Maddox 2020). Schools—which are supposed to be the great equalizer—and particularly integrated schools—which are supposed to be the jewel in the crown of school reform—have an organizational and cultural imperative to address inequality. While previous research examines and uncovers the

nature of inequality in suburban schools, scholars have yet to fully theorize and analyze what happens once suburban school districts are made aware of this inequality. In this dissertation, I will explore how suburban schools make sense of the inequality in their midst and how they make plans for a more equitable future.

In recent years, the demographic makeup of U.S. suburbs has vastly changed, and scholar/cultural ideas of the suburbs have changed as well. Suburbs used to be the target destination of white flight and, as such, have long existed in the public imagination as largely white and affluent domains (Diamond and Posey-Maddox 2020). Over the last decade, though, suburbs have become increasingly racially and socioeconomically diverse (Frankenberg and Orfield 2012; Wells et al. 2012; Chapman 2013, 2014). As per Diamond and Posey-Maddox (2020), more than half of all Black families in the United States now live in the suburbs, and 55% of all low-income families live in the suburbs as well. This demographic shift in the suburbs has, of course, included a major demographic shift in suburban schools. (Although, it should be noted that this demographic change is not as extreme as it might seem—Black families have a long history of suburban living, just not one that is often associated culturally with the suburbs.) Diamond and Posey-Maddox (2020) note that for many years suburbs have not been a major area of focus for education researchers, and they call for more attention to these dynamically changing communities. They make their call as researchers have indeed begun to turn their attention to these supposedly idyllic schools and districts, finding that official measures of academic success like test scores, graduation rates, and college attendance rates have masked a deep-seated culture of inequality within these schools.

This racial diversification of the suburbs has given researchers an expanding number of school cases in which they can study contemporary *integration* closely. Integration has its history

in the public imagination as the end-goal of the Civil Rights Movement, an idea that Black scholars and activists have questioned for many years. In fact, as scholars like Karida Brown (2016, 2018) and Karolyn Tyson (2011) have elucidated, the process of integrating schools in the south following the 1954 landmark *Brown vs Board of Education* case involved many consequences—both intended and unintended (Payne 2008). Following the ruling, white families engaged in years of opportunity and resource hoarding as well as well-documented attempts to stop the integration process entirely through violent protest in addition to school choice laws that allowed them to continue to send their children to de facto segregated schools (Bonastia 2006). Additionally, a generation of Black educators lost their jobs (Tillman 2004; Lash and Ratcliffe 2014), and a generation of Black children were schooled in psychologically, symbolically, and physically violent settings by white educators who approached them with negativity ranging from disdain to disgust (Payne 2008; Lyons and Chesley 2004) Despite this history, the idea that integration is the appropriate goal for education policymakers and activists has persisted (Johnson 2019). In the last five years, news stories with flashy headlines about how schools are more segregated than ever have been everywhere, demonstrating that Black students and other students of color largely make up the populations of lower performing urban schools, while white and affluent students largely make up the populations of higher performing suburban/urban schools. Journalist Nikole Hannah Jones (2016) describes this situation in glaring detail, demonstrating the difficulties she experienced choosing an elementary school for her daughter in New York City. Another popular podcast, Nice White Parents (Joffe-Walt 2020), details the dynamics between white parents and public schools, demonstrating how the combination of parental behavior and school processes keeps schools segregated. These findings are also reflected in scholarly work (Bonastia 2022). Stories like this get a lot of public attention, and it is

not my intention to undermine their arguments. Behaviors among white parents that prioritize their own children's well-being at the expense of other children are extremely harmful and important to shine a light on. However, at the same time as these stories are grabbing national attention, integrated schools are also failing Black students, other students of color, and low-income students (both students of color and white) just a few miles away in the suburbs.

Recently, education scholars have turned their attention to the suburbs and examined these dynamics in several different ways. First, some scholars have looked at the *diversification process,* analyzing how school districts respond as their population shifts. Erica Turner (2020), for example, in her recent book *Suddenly Diverse,* analyzes two rapidly diversifying Midwestern school districts, finding that while they want to make inroads to increase equity in their districts, they often adopt managerial or business-like solutions that not only fail to improve the situation for students of color in their districts but often actually exacerbate inequality through new manifestations of racism. Alison Tyler (2016), too, finds that in a diversifying suburban school district, most teachers saw increased racial diversity through damaging lenses—either taking a colorblind approach or a deficit approach to their students of color. Jessica Shiller (2016) confirms this finding by demonstrating that the increasing diversity in the suburbs made suburban schools more similar to urban schools, a finding that resonates with Turner (2020) as well. Other scholars have also demonstrated these inequities in suburban districts and have highlighted the experiences of Latinx students in the suburbs (Rodriguez 2020; Reich, Stemhagen, and Siegal-Hawley 2014).

Other scholars have analyzed suburban districts that are, at least on the surface, integrated. In their 2015 book *Despite the Best Intentions, How Racial Inequality Thrives in Good Schools,* Amanda Lewis and John Diamond demonstrate that integration and equitable

education are not one and the same. Through an intensive ethnographic study of one racially diverse school district in Illinois, they find that despite reaching external measures of success (like high test scores), the district was rife with inequality. They divide their analysis into two parts—one that outlines the unequal disciplinary practices in the school and another that demonstrates how the school reproduces academic inequality through tracking and advanced course taking. In the end, they argue that while the *ostensive* (or written) aspects of the school's policies were perfectly equitable, the *performative (*or everyday experience/application) of those policies was deeply unequal. For example, while nowhere was a rule written that more white and affluent students should take honors or Advanced Placement courses, this is still what happened, largely through implicit biases of teachers and guidance counselors, as well as white parents who harangued the school into giving them what they wanted for their children. This dynamic between white parents and suburban schools is also documented in L'Heureux Lewis-McCoy's 2014 analysis of suburban schools as well. Between the structures of suburban schools and the actions of white and affluent parents, it seems clear that despite the supposed promise of integration, integrated schools—both racially and socioeconomically integrated schools—are, as Lucas (2001: 1642) has said, "effectively maintaining inequality."

Whether it is through the obvious effects of the changing demographic populations of their schools or through the recent scholarly attention paid to achievement and opportunity gaps within their districts—and, of course, whether it is due to genuine concern or an attempt to maintain organizational legitimacy—suburban district leaders and teachers are responding to the call for increased attention to equity issues in their schools. This dissertation adds to the studies outlined above by first responding to the call from Diamond and Posey-Maddox (2020) to focus on the suburbs and then doing so in a way that looks at what happens after these districts are

confronted with the reality of the inequality in their midst. How do they reconcile their ideas of racial diversity/integration as an inherent *good* with the reality that their institutions are still reproducing inequality?

Course Taking, Tracking, and Curriculum

I look specifically at inequality in academics—both academic outcomes and academic practices—in suburban schools. I look at policies meant to make academic outcomes more equitable, one of the most important areas for schools to fix, largely through increasing representation of students of color and lower-socioeconomic status (SES) students in honors and advanced courses. I also consider debates over diversifying curricular content. When asked about issues with inequality within their schools, teachers and administrators alike tended to first point to a lack of representational diversity in advanced or honors courses. They were often concerned that the population in these advanced courses did not statistically reflect the population of the district. While we might want to think about our schools as meritocratic institutions—ones in which success is earned based on effort rather than bestowed based on privilege—the lack of representational diversity in advanced courses exposes this idea for what it is: an unfounded myth. There is quite a bit of research on this topic that has become common knowledge, at least in the education realm. While, as I indicated above, researchers tended not to focus their attention on suburban schools for many years, there has been no dearth of research demonstrating the damaging impacts of tracking. Extensive previous research demonstrates the potential consequences students tracked into lower-level academic courses face both in school and down the line (e.g., Burris and Garrity 2008; Gamoran 1992; Moller and Stearns 2012; Oakes 1985; Riegle-Crumb and Grodsky 2010). The experience of being tracked into lower-level courses can have impacts on college acceptance, college completion, and earning potential. In

addition, there is a plethora of research that demonstrates that tracking patterns correlate to student race and class—while white and affluent students tend to be tracked up into honors and advanced courses, students of color (and especially Black and Latinx students) as well as lower income students tend to be tracked into lower-leveled courses (Lewis and Diamond 2015; Domina et al. 2017; Riegle-Crumb and Grodsky 2010). Given this, it makes sense that this is a problem district administrators and teachers alike are interested in solving. While the teachers and administrators in my study might not be able to rattle off a list of academic citations, they understand that tracking has consequences, and that students often experience bias in their tracking.

Along similar lines, teachers and administrators also expressed concern about the lack of diversity in their curricula—most commonly their English Language Arts or English reading lists and their history or social studies textbooks. Many scholars have analyzed the political nature of curricular content. Many scholars approach this topic by looking at textbook content, arguing that textbooks demonstrate how societal understandings of history (e.g., Lachmann and Mitchell 2014; Dierkes 2012; Ward 2006, Nash, et al 2000, FitzGerald 1979); race (Morning 2011); and human rights/environmental rights (Bromley 2016) have changed over time. While some scholars have found that the official curriculum is rarely implemented as it is written (Lee et al. 2009), others have found important consequences of the written curriculum itself. Scholars have argued that including multicultural curricula can benefit both students of color and white students (Ladson-Billings 1995, 2004, 2014; Kincheloe 2011, Dee and Penner 2016), a practice that is one integral part of culturally responsive pedagogy (Brown-Jeffy and Cooper 2011). Cech (2017) finds that curriculum, in addition to school diversity, extracurricular activities, and reading, can have a measurable impact on students' understandings of inequality.

In addition to this more recent scholarship about curricular content and inequality, Michael Apple (1979; 1993), the foundational Marxist education scholar in the United States, makes several arguments throughout his body of work for interpreting every aspect of schooling—including and perhaps even especially curricular content—as part of a political struggle. In his work, he is concerned with the question of *legitimate* knowledge, but he emphasizes that this is a constant political struggle. He labels this process of legitimizing knowledge the "selective tradition" and asks questions such as: "Whose knowledge is it? Who selected it? Why is it organized and taught in this way? To this particular group?" (Apple 1979:7). Apple also makes an argument for the actual effects that curricula have on students. He believes that the actual school activities are directly related to the workplaces students are expected to populate; for example, filling out worksheets is akin to menial, manual labor (Apple 1979). He also argues that students learn how to be political in school; they learn what role they can play in society. This becomes increasingly important as students get older, and curricular content becomes more important in legitimizing certain expectations of society. Specifically, he argues that the ways in which curricular content demonstrates dealing with conflict shows students what they can expect from their political institutions; in this way, he argues that the curriculum sets ideological limits and limits on critical thinking for students (Apple 1979). It is this tradition that I aim to follow with this dissertation, arguing that in addition to setting ideological limits for students, curricula reflect teacher and administrator ideological limits. By exploring access to advanced academic courses/access to academic *success* along with debates around inequality in curricular content, I am able to demonstrate how districts' commitments to reducing and solving inequality play out in the context of this specific area of equity concerns.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Conceptions of, and solutions for, inequality in academics in suburban schools is the broad, substantive *what* of this project. Here, I will turn to the *how,* the theoretical framework. The questions that I am asking throughout this project lend themselves well to ideas from a range of theoretical traditions. First, I consider the way scholars have written about conceptions of inequality as a social problem. Next, I draw on institutional theory to explain how districts maintain a commitment to reducing and educating about inequality, as well as ideas from the sociology of race and racism to help explain what inequality *means* in this context (beyond its designation as a social problem) and how it comes to be that DEI initiatives are centered around ideas about diversity and not necessarily equity or inclusion. Ideas from political and cultural sociology help explain the political avoidance (Eliasoph 1998) at work in the districts, and finally, ideas about moral panics and disruptions help as I conceptualize the effects of the shocks of COVID-19 and George Floyd's murder. I will now discuss the ideas I draw on from each of these theories.

Institutional Theory

This project looks at school districts' *commitments*, which are a core preoccupation within institutional theory. How do organizations and the people that occupy them make sense of their commitments; in this case, how do schools make sense of their commitments to fixing and educating about inequality? When are these commitments tightly coupled to day-to-day organizational life and when are they decoupled? What happens when some of their commitments conflict, or when an external disruption changes the way the organization operates? These questions are all relevant to this project and are all answered, at least in part, by institutional theory.

Even before—but certainly since—John Meyer and Brian Rowan's seminal 1977 article in which they used schools as an example to illustrate the inner workings of organizations within

an institutional environment, scholars studying schools have drawn on institutional theory as a useful lens for better understanding what goes on in schools (e.g. Burch 2007; Coburn 2004; Woulfin and Allen 2022). In their article, Meyer and Rowan explain that large cultural ideas—which they term institutional myths, but have also been called logics or rationales—guide structures, rules, and routines across organizations existing within the same institutional field. In Hallett and Hawbaker's (2020:4) words, "institutional myths are widespread cultural ideas that provide a rational theory of how organizations ought to operate." Meyer and Rowan argue that similarities—or isomorphism—among similar organizations are the result of organizations drawing on the same myths. In general, Meyer and Rowan contend, schools tend to be loosely coupled with the institutional myths that they commit to. Rather than true tight coupling between myths and day-to-day practices within schools, these organizations maintain symbolic or ceremonial rituals that reinforce conformity to the myth without necessarily affecting practices on the ground. In a 2006 article, Brian Rowan and Heinz-Deiter Meyer change the original argument to better suit the educational landscape of the moment. They argue that while in most organizations isomorphism between rules and rituals has to do with maintaining efficiency or turning a profit, in the institutional field of public schooling, which is not as deeply concerned with making money, these similarities between organizations are about something different. They argue that by conforming to cultural or institutional myths through shared rituals and rules, schools maintain legitimacy within the field. As they explain it, "the key constraint for educational institutions in this view is the need to maintain the trust and confidence of the public at large—in short, to maintain legitimacy by conforming to institutionalized norms, values, and technical lore" (Rowan and Meyer 2006:4–5). In addition, they argue that schools are more tightly coupled with their institutional fields than ever before because of accountability policies

that control much of what goes on within organizations. Indeed, as Tim Hallett (2010) demonstrates in his article "The Myth Incarnate: Recoupling Processes, Turmoil, and Inhabited Institutions in an Urban Elementary School," when these institutional myths—in his case, accountability—*become* tightly coupled with organizational practices, this creates turmoil for the people on the ground. In this case, teachers struggled to apply accountability policies to their everyday teaching.

In my work, I use Meyer and Rowan's (1977) original concept of institutional myths to conceptualize the guiding principles that suburban schools adhere to. In the 2006 article, Rowan and Meyer make the case that because the purpose of institutional theory is to explain why one particular organizational "form" is accepted at any given time, it is important to consider changes to society that might change what kind of form is accepted in the first place. Jeffrey Guhin (2020) also makes this argument in his work, using his ethnographic data to establish the three most central institutional myths that guide interactions within religious schools. Plenty of scholars both within and outside of the institutional theory literature have analyzed the changing role public schools have played in our society. Educational historian David Labaree (1997) argues that public schools have changed from operating as a public good—something dedicated to the general betterment of society and the community—to a private good—something solely meant to improve individual social standing in society. He argues that this shift toward social mobility as a goal of schooling reorients the expectations we hold for schools. Kantor and Lowe (1995), another educational historian, argues that this shift has to do with larger policy initiatives—from the GI Bill to the Great Society programs—that relied on increased skill through schooling to help individuals move out of poverty. These programs, Kantor and Lowe argue, created the idea that schools are responsible for solving inequality, thus making the

connection between school and social mobility that Labaree notes in his work.

This historical scholarship establishes that the major accountability policies of the early 2000s were by no means the first time schools were expected to account for inequality. Instead, the accountability policies that Rowan and Meyer (2006) and Hallett (2010) note are the reinvigoration of an old cultural idea about public schooling—that it is the institution responsible for solving society's major social problems. This idea is reflected in more contemporary historical work that examines the changing purpose of schooling—or school programming. For example, James Davison Hunter (2000) argues that by the early 2000s, character education programs—programs meant to educate the "heart" rather than the head—were failing in schools. In my previous work (Handsman 2021), I extend Hunter's argument to attend to changes through 2016. I also find that the discourse around character education has changed—whereas between 1985–2004 people argued for character programs in order to improve students' morals or behavior, after No Child Left Behind was implemented in 2004, people started only arguing for character programming that would improve students' academic performance. I reference this scholarship here because the shift in expectations of character programs likely reflects a shift in expectations of schools as well. This set of scholarship demonstrates that the institution of public schooling—while long standing and certainly stalwart in many ways—is ever changing.

Institutional myths, then, are powerful in that they guide the way teachers and administrators make sense of their experiences in their schools. As I discussed above, suburban schools are supposed to be idyllic, the best of the best. The fact that inequality still exists within these schools—and that this inequality is reflective of broader, structural inequalities in society—does not mirror the image teachers and administrators have of the institutions in which they work. In order to analyze how institutional myths operate within suburban public schools, it

is essential to first establish what those myths are. Rather than assume the myths that exist within the institutional field, I analyze data from the 60 suburban school districts in the suburbs of Philadelphia in order to establish what norms constitute the institutional myths of suburban schooling. I argue that the combination of school districts' commitments to excellence, diversity and inclusion, and preparing students for success in a global society adds up to commitments—or institutional myths—around both reducing and educating about inequality.

In addition to establishing the institutional myths guiding suburban public schools, this dissertation analyzes how these myths operate within three of these school districts. In order to analyze this phenomenon, I rely on a newer iteration of institutional scholarship: inhabited institutionalism. Tim Hallett's (2010) approach stems from the argument that in order to properly understand institutions, researchers need to attend to the people within the institutions, and in particular, pay attention to their *interactions.* He calls this approach "inhabited institutionalism," arguing in a 2020 article co-authored with Amelia Hawbaker that while neoinstitutional theorists like Meyer and Rowan are focused on the relationship between institution and organizations, it is equally important to take this third aspect of the situation into account: interactions between people on the ground. Hallett and Hawbaker (2020:3–4) argue that "inhabited institutionalism is a mesosociological framework for examining the recursive relationships among institutions, interactions, and organizations." In other words, they believe that in order to answer pressing questions about schools as organizations that exist within an institutional field, scholars should consider the relationship—tight or loose coupling—between not only the institutional field and organizations, but also interactions that happen within the organization as well. In this case, I look at the level of coupling between what district personnel say, their organizational practices, and institutional myths.

Education scholars in the past have made a similar argument by pulling on a different set of literatures. Cynthia Coburn, in her 2001 article about teacher sensemaking, also argues that institutional theory needs to take *people* into account, and she does so by demonstrating how teachers' sensemaking regarding reading and literacy policy changes ultimately have a measurable impact on the implementation of those policies. In a 2004 article, she builds on this to bridge sensemaking theories with framing theories to account for conflict within teacher interactions. Both Hallett and Hawbaker and Coburn's approaches make one thing clear: In order to understand how institutional myths operate within organizations, one must study the *people existing within those organizations, and their interactions*. Jeffrey Guhin, in his 2020 book *Agents of G-d,* takes this perspective as he examines how institutional myths gain *authority* within religious school communities. He argues that institutional myths—like prayer, scripture, and science—take on "external authority" within religious school communities. He demonstrates how these myths mediate individuals' agency—the decisions they make, the experiences they have, their interactions all occur through the lens of this vital set of myths.

Similar to this scholarship, my dissertation looks at the relationship between institutional myths and the people who populate the organizations at hand. After establishing that schools operate within a certain set of aspirational, projected, or branded values, I follow in the footsteps of Hallett and Hawbaker, Coburn, Guhin, and many others by foregrounding the ways in which these myths operate *through* the people on the ground. While my dissertation data does not center *interactions* in the way that Hallett and Hawbaker insist (because most of my data is interviews and documents rather than ethnographic), my data does allow me to demonstrate the parameters and consequences of teacher and administrator sensemaking around inequality.

Above all else, ideas from institutional theory are the primary framework I use to make

sense of my data. I leverage ideas like institutional myths, coupling, and inhabited institutionalism to better understand the way schools made sense of inequality between 2019–2022. Most importantly, the concept of institutional myths helps to make sense of districts' extant commitments to reducing and educating about inequality (chapter 2). I then assess the level of coupling between these myths and day-to-day life at school in order to better understand whether and how these commitments have tangible consequences for schooling (chapters 3 and 5). I also use this framework to make sense of conflicts among the districts' various commitments (chapters 4 and 6). When myths conflict, Meyer and Rowan (1977:355) note that "inconsistencies make a concern for efficiency and tight coordination and control problematic." I use this premise to evaluate the conflict districts experience between their commitments to both reducing and educating about inequality and to political neutrality. Finally, I use institutional theory as a framework for predicting what will happen in districts following external disruptions and change (chapter 5). I contribute to institutional theory in a few ways, as well. First, I demonstrate how institutional myths interact with racial ideologies (chapters 3 and 5). Second, while Meyer and Rowan discuss the potential effects of conflict between myths, this particular phenomenon is understudied in the literature, and I am able to elucidate what exactly those conflicts look like (chapters 4 and 6).

The Meaning of Inequality

In addition to being a story about institutional commitments, this is also a story about structural inequality. While the institutional story tells us why and how school districts are solving inequality, it doesn't tell us what that inequality *is,* how it's *interpreted,* what it means in this specific context. Two people or groups can be committed to equity and that commitment will mean something entirely different depending on what equity means to the individuals or groups.

I address this by discussing first how inequality is constructed as a social problem and then how racial ideologies affect how school workers interpret this problem.

Constructions of inequality as a social problem.

School districts maintain a commitment to reducing and educating about inequality, and teachers and administrators report those same values as integral to the makeup of their schools. Given this, the inequality in these districts exposes a major dissonance between their commitments to equity and their unequal reality. Other scholars have noted this dissonance created by large-scale inequality in U.S. schools overall. Merton (1938), for example, argues that the amount of inequality in our schools Is dissonant with American values, like equality, creating a sort of pressure in society that should ostensibly inspire people to work to ameliorate it. Seymour Lipset (1997) argues that being American is an "ideological commitment" to holding certain values sacred—values such as egalitarianism and liberty—thus creating the "pressure" that Merton identifies. These scholars discuss large-scale inequalities between schools and student outcomes across the board. One might think that, given the supposed quality of *suburban* schools, they might be exempt from this pressure. However, due to the many reasons examined in the sections on suburban schools, these school districts both experience this same kind of pressure and have more resources at hand to attend to it.

So, how do people think about and conceptualize inequality? Scholars have argued that aspects of the social environment—what institutional theorists might call institutional myths, for example—deeply influence the way people construct their understandings of social problems. DuBois (1898:1) argued that social problems are "a relation between condition and action" noting that "as conditions and actions vary and change from group to group, from time to time, and from place to place, so social problems change, develop and grow." This definition makes

the case that social scientists examining social problems need to take context into account as they analyze the meaning any specific social problem carries. Some more recent scholarship traces the way that social problems are treated in the media, coming in and out of fashion (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988; Ball and Lilly 1982; Best 2010; Saguy and Gruys 2010). Other scholarship looks at the rhetoric around social problems, noting that this language and framing can be influenced by racism and other structural inequalities (Best 1987; Drakulich 2015; Gubrium 2005). Additionally, there is some scholarship that looks specifically at the *narratives* at play in discussions of social problems (Gubrium 2005). These narratives frame the way social problems are discussed and debated in society.

Narratives can inform and explain efforts to make change (Polletta 2009), and in suburban schools I find a simplistic narrative at play: problem and solution. The problem and solution narrative is one of the most fundamental story lines in existence—we teach it to kindergartners and first graders to help them understand the concept of the narrative arc in stories. Despite its simplicity, it is also very powerful and integral to understanding efforts to make change. In order to come up with a solution, of course, someone needs to define the problem. In this dissertation, I project this simple narrative onto discourse about inequality at school. If *inequality* is the problem, then *equity* and *DEI work* are the solution. In this way, ideas about inequality and ideas about equity are co-constitutive, or two sides of the same coin. In order to understand how teachers and administrators conceptualize and plan for equity, then, I argue that we first have to know how they make sense of and understand inequality.

Many scholars have investigated various aspects of this question. Leslie McCall (2013), for example, analyzes how people understand inequality, *equality* and specifically *equality of opportunity*. In her book, McCall argues against the assumption that Americans do not care about

inequality. Instead, she finds that people's beliefs about inequality, opportunity, and redistribution are intertwined. In addition, there is no one understanding of what opportunity means; instead, she finds that people have a range of beliefs about opportunity, including ideas about job availability, fair pay, and equal treatment of people from different class backgrounds (McCall 2013). People generally experience the United States as unequal and opportunities as unfairly distributed. They have antipathy toward the wealthy and tend to support redistributive policies when seen as detached from partisan politics. While her book uses survey data to gain a broad sense of how U.S. citizens conceptualize inequality, her findings are very much relevant to this dissertation as well. Along similar lines, Rachel Sherman (2017) finds that wealthy people also have concerns about inequality, which they express through the need to maintain their moral worth by justifying what they have as earned or deserved. Given the role schools play in society, it follows that school workers (teachers, building administrators, and district administrators) would also hold inequality beliefs, and construct problem and solution narratives around how to reduce inequality in schools. In order to properly understand these beliefs, though, it is important to also take theories of race and racism into account.

Race, racism, and racial ideologies.

Despite the wide range of topics addressed by institutional theory, ideas from this intellectual tradition are not sufficient to make sense of districts' understandings of inequality. As I described at the beginning of this chapter, there are several stories unfolding here at once: the institutional story is one of them, but there is also a story about racial inequality. From the institutional myths the districts are committed to (shown empirically in chapter 2), we can glean that these districts have a commitment to ameliorating inequality. From the way these institutional myths operate in tandem with organizational constraints and interactions on the

ground, and from the results of conflicts between myths, we can better understand how this commitment to fixing inequality actually unfolds within the districts. However, in order to understand what inequality *means* to the districts, I turn to ideas from the sociology of race/class/gender/stratification, primarily focusing on theories of *racial ideology,* theories of *racial formation,* and ideas about class.

Racism permeates everything, and so it does not make sense to try to decipher conceptions of inequality without thinking deeply about conceptions of race and racism. Many scholars have addressed this by conceptualizing racism in several different ways. Previous work has notably addressed the intersection of racism and organizations (Ray 2019). Ray (2019) takes a meso-level perspective and argues that organizations are inherently racialized social systems. He argues that racialized organizations "enhance or diminish the agency of racial groups…[and] legitimate the unequal distribution of resources" and that "whiteness is a credential; and decoupling is racialized" (Ray 2019:27). As I am also describing an organizational, meso-level story it might, on the surface, make sense to use his framework as the primary analytic lens for understanding how race and racism function in the school districts. However, while Ray is focused on combining the study of organizations with the study of racialization, my focus is slightly different. Ray explains that organizations are at the meso level, while he describes institutions as macro, state-level ideas. This definition of institutions is quite different from how institutional theorists describe institutions, as "social forms or templates composed of clusters of conventions that script behavior to varying degrees in given contexts" (Barley 2008:495). In this sense, institutions exist in relation to both organizations and individuals, guiding norms (through institutional myths), but are not necessarily *bigger* in Ray's sense. This is important because in my conceptualization of institutions, organizations, and race, I focus on how institutional myths

combine with racial ideologies to influence behavior, whereas Ray is demonstrating how the racialization process takes place specifically within *organizations* themselves. My conceptualization does not necessarily conflict with his; in fact, the districts I study generally meet Ray's qualifications as "racialized organizations."[1]

Instead, I focus on one major theoretical concept: racial ideologies (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Mayorga-Gallo 2019). Scholars have described shifting racial structures or regimes over the past century, with Bonilla-Silva (2003) identifying the 1960s as the point at which the "new racial structure" emerged, and Melamed (2011) relying on Winant's theory of the "racial break" post-World War II as the key moment of change. This scholarship, despite its differences, emphasizes that racism looks different now than it did 60–75 years ago. Rather than blunt, overt racism, it plays out in more subtle ways. Scholars have defined this in different ways, including Melamed and Bonilla-Silva. Melamed describes this "newer" racism as a series of evolving official commitments to antiracism that nevertheless work to reinforce and reproduce racism, while Bonilla-Silva describes it as colorblind ideology.

Bonilla-Silva (2003:33) describes racial ideology as, "the racially based frameworks used by actors to explain and justify (dominant race) or challenge (subordinate race or races) the racial status quo." He goes on to explain that racial ideologies have "common frames, style, and racial stories." Ideologies can play out at the institutional, organizational, and individual level—this makes ideology the proper analytic lens for my data, which also encompasses those multiple levels. Bonilla-Silva argues that the dominant racial ideology since at least the late 1950s is one

[1] I do extend Ray's (2019) theory by noting how racialized organizations that exist with a stated commitment to reducing inequality might have slightly different qualities (i.e., potentially tighter coupling). Overall, though, I am looking at how racial ideologies interact with institutional myths to influence behavior, rather than how the organizations themselves are racialized. These are very related inquiries, of course, but distinct enough to not rely on Ray's theory as the primary interlocutor with my data.

of *colorblindness*. Mayorga-Gallo (2019) builds on this idea, examining what she identifies as an emerging racial ideology—one that *acknowledges* race but still undermines progress toward fixing racism. She calls this a "diversity ideology," which consists of the following tenets: a focus on acceptance or tolerance; centering white people's good intentions; commodification of otherness; and a concern for how white people worry about how increasing diversity could be a liability for them. Other scholars have weighed in on this debate as well. Recently, Ranita Ray (2022) argued that another new racial ideology has emerged in schools, which she calls "race-conscious racism." However, as I will demonstrate through this dissertation, the schools in my study operate within a "diversity ideology," not within Ray's race-conscious racism, Bonilla-Silva's colorblind racism, or an entirely new racial ideology. Despite their focus on diversity, though, the particular contours of their version of diversity ideology are slightly different from what Mayorga-Gallo describes. I argue that this slight shift is a result of the institutional myths that push districts' continued commitment to fixing inequality. Thus, I contribute to this literature by demonstrating how institutional myths can act as an intermediary variable, reshaping racial ideologies to fit with the myth.

Melamed (2011), on the other hand, focuses on a discourse analysis spanning approximately the last 75 years. In her book, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism,* she argues that the United States has progressed through several "official" or state-legitimated "antiracist" projects: racial liberalism, liberal multiculturalism, and neoliberal multiculturalism. She argues that these official, legitimated forms of "antiracism" have defined the discourse about inequality, and in particular, about racism, in U.S. society. She argues that while these formal antiracisms have certainly been challenged by both more radical justice movements and by overt white supremacy, they remain the most salient discourse—

masquerading as justice-oriented while still maintaining a liberal/neoliberal capitalist order. In this way, "official" antiracism constrains people's conception of *racism* and thereby constrains conceptions of potential solutions to the problem. Bonilla-Silva (2003), Mayorga-Gallo (2019), and Melamed (2011) have several overlaps, most notably, of course, the overarching idea that racism is a structure that plays out at the group level and that the particulars of that structure shift with culture. Melamed's neoliberal multiculturalism is very similar to Bonilla-Silva's abstract liberalism. I bring both of these together here because the ideology at play is "diversity ideology," but the antiracist project, the end goal of inequality work conducted within this ideology is *representation*, as Melamed describes. Whereas Bonilla-Silva and Mayorga-Gallo's work on racial ideologies captures *racism,* Melamed specifically captures the way people attempt to do *antiracist* work within these racist structures. Melamed's work also offers us an alternative, that she calls race radicalism, in which antiracist work would explicitly challenge racial capitalism. In the end, these two theories combined help explain the phenomenon I find in the DEI Doctrine: that all equity work is ultimately focused on representational diversity, to the exclusion of other potential equity goals.

This "antiracist" project born out of a racial ideology focused on diversity has also been studied by several scholars. Scholars have found that people (usually white people) will engage in "happy talk" around diversity, meaning they celebrate racial diversity in a way that ends up obscuring or even intensifying inequality (Bell and Hartmann 2007; Thomas 2018). Similarly, Tissot (2014) argues that white people will leverage their neighborhood's diversity as a commodity to demonstrate a certain set of racial politics. Additionally, Douds (2021) demonstrates how a "diversity contract" emerges in one specific, suburban community—in which diversity is only mentioned under very specific circumstances. While more often heard in

the context of higher education (e.g., Berrey 2015; Warikoo 2016, diversity as a social justice goal is akin to the idea of *integration* as a social justice goal—integrated schools are, inherently, diverse schools, and these are seen by many as the ultimate goal of school reform efforts. Some scholarship on diversity efforts finds that these efforts are often mere rhetoric, allowing schools to perform the institutional myth of equity without making any substantive change (Berrey 2015). Others find that privileged college students support diversity efforts insofar as they feel they can personally benefit from these initiatives. They get to feel good about supporting efforts for equity but only if they do not actually have to give up any of their privilege (Warikoo 2016). Finally, scholarship looking at the way teachers see diversity in K–12 schools finds that teachers operate under a colorblind ideology or similarly focus on the positive aspects of working in a diverse school (Tyler 2016). On the other hand, more recent scholarship demonstrates that suburban school administrators and teachers are now willing to talk about race though they are still uncomfortable talking about class (Foley 2021; Welton, Diem, and Holme 2015).

This finding echoes my own data: School workers do not uphold a traditional colorblind racial ideology but rather are focused on *diversity.* I argue that this racial ideology, in concert with institutional myths around ameliorating inequality, determines how DEI work happens in schools. Notably, some parents operate within a colorblind ideology, which opened the door for the culture clashes that have taken place after 2020. Other scholars who have investigated how conceptions of equity inform school district policy have looked at where conceptions fall along a political spectrum (Guitton and Oakes 1995; Albright et al. 2018) or how these conceptions are malleable to fit with stakeholder demands (Turner and Spain 2016; Huguet, et al 2021). Here, I bridge my analysis of conceptions of equity with theories of racial ideologies, using the argument that race and racism play a role in how school workers understand inequality.

Political Neutrality, Nonpartisan Commitments, and Schooling between 2019–2022

In addition to an institutional story and a racial ideology story, this dissertation also includes a story about politics, partisanship, and neutrality. The social context that surrounded my data collection included the aftermath of Trump's campaign and election and then the dual shocks of COVID-19 and George Floyd's murder, which were both understood through partisan lenses. Together these stories show the push and pull that school districts face as they try to maintain their commitment to reducing and educating about inequality while also maintaining their commitment to political neutrality.

Paradox of politics in public schooling, 2019–2022.

Public schooling exists in a paradox: Public schools are expected to be politically neutral and nonpartisan, but at the same time, they are inherently political institutions. At some points in history, public schools have been able to be *covertly* political without garnering accusations of partisanship. Apple (2008) argues that every aspect of schooling is political, in the sense that filling out worksheets, for example, prepares students for rote, blue collar work. Other scholars argue that schools play an essential role in creating citizens with "participatory readiness," or an ability to participate in civil life (Allen 2016). This is political in the sense that the structure and content of school curricula help reproduce inequality by socializing students into their role in the proletariat or the elite (Apple 1979; Bowles and Gintis 1976), preparing students to engage in civic life (Allen 2016), or exposing students to a broad range of cultural contexts (Dewey 1923), but not in the *partisan* sense of Democrat schools versus Republican schools. In fact, public schools are committed and expected to maintain nonpartisan stances; the only overtly partisan aspect of public schooling is school board elections (in some states). Because public schooling is compulsory, and the United States is an ostensibly pluralist society that accepts a range of

political, religious, and cultural identities, it is essential that public schools maintain an overt commitment to avoiding partisanship as readily as they avoid religion,[2] even as *covert* routines (known in the literature as the hidden curriculum) do socialize students into their political roles. In this way, schools can be both *political* and *nonpartisan* institutions. However, this is a precarious position that depends on agreed-upon norms around what "counts" as partisan.

The past several years have posed a challenge to this precarious position. First, many scholars have argued that the United States' political polarization is *asymmetric*—Republicans have moved much farther to the right than Democrats have moved to the left (Grossman and Hopkins 2016; Hacker and Pierson 2015). In this dissertation, I demonstrate how this asymmetry, combined with former President Trump's unprecedented rhetoric in both his campaign and presidency, changed the norms around what "counted" as partisan. Whereas school districts' commitments to reducing and educating about inequality were previously seen as innocuous (in the partisan sense), the asymmetry helped Trump's political machine to construe these efforts as partisan. While these conflicts certainly arose at various times before this moment in history, this confluence of events created the conflict school districts contended with between their commitments to inequality and their commitments to remaining nonpartisan (Dunn, Sondel, and Bagett 2019). This conflict unfolded in various ways between 2019–2022, first as the districts dealt with the aftermath of Trump's election and then as they coped with the onset of COVID-19, the murder of George Floyd, and the backlash to their newly re-energized DEI efforts. Similarly to Eliasoph's (1998) "political avoidance," in which volunteers hide their

[2] It is debated in the legal literature whether public students count as "captive audiences" because the school is a part of the state (Salkin 2015). However, in Pennsylvania at least, refraining from any political activity in school is a school board policy, and there have been rulings against public school teachers wearing political buttons to school (i.e., *Weingarten v. Board of Education* 2008).

true political beliefs behind a veneer of apathy, school districts and their workers in this context have to *work hard* to avoid seeming partisan. However, rather than hiding behind a fake apathy as she finds, they use their purported school values as a way to shield themselves from accusations of partisanship. As Teeger (2015) describes, schools tend to "avoid" the accusation of partisanship or politics by leveraging values—especially values like inclusion and tolerance. In the end, this means that they might endorse teaching "both sides" of an issue or taking a complex and unquestionable issue like structural racism and presenting it as one of many legitimate ideologies. It might also mean they allow parents to opt their children out of any lesson they do not like.

Parent politics and public schooling, 2020–2022.

As an additional challenge to public schools attempting to maintain their nonpartisan status, the time following the dual shocks of COVID-19 and George Floyd's murder saw an influx of parent involvement in schooling (Klein 2021). Parents became much more engaged and involved with school district decision-making around COVID-19, unsurprisingly, as these decisions had major impacts on family life. Parents *also* maintained high levels of involvement following Floyd's murder—both parents on the left who demanded more DEI efforts and parents on the right who labeled any DEI effort as left-wing partisan indoctrination. While parents were not the primary unit of analysis for this dissertation, it became important to include them when they became a much more prevalent factor in district decision-making.

In order to understand the dynamics at play, I draw on literature from political sociology and political science since these parents' actions can be conceptualized as grassroots political involvement. Scholars have argued that Americans of both parties are more concerned with their social identity than specific party concerns, leaving parties to work to construct "us versus them"

mentalities to garner support (Achen and Bartels 2017). Several other scholars have demonstrated how this unfolds. Cramer (2016) demonstrates how Wisconsin Republicans cultivated a "rural consciousness" focused on resentment to aid Scott Walker's rise to power, and Lacombe (2021) argues that the National Rifle Association (NRA) worked to shape gun owners into an identity category in order to maintain power. I find that both groups of white parents are indeed spurred by their racial ideologies, which I argue are an essential aspect of their social identities.

Additionally, I describe how anti-DEI parents were swept up in a moral panic that was actively fomented by Republican politicians, activists, and media members. Moral panics are defined as times where,

> the behavior of some of the members of a society is thought by others to be so problematic, the evil they do, or are thought to do, is felt to be so wounding to the substance and fabric of the body social that serious steps must be taken to control the behavior, punish the perpetrators, and repair the damage. (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2011:35)

Moral panics are cultural events actively fomented by people in power in order to maintain a stranglehold on that power, and they rely on misinformation (Reed 2015). Given these definitions, white, Republican parent outrage over DEI (which they call "critical race theory") certainly fits. While culture wars are not new to U.S. public schools (Zimmerman 2005; Katznelson 2005), the 2020–2022 clash has been particularly vicious. However, because school districts are committed to maintaining their nonpartisan stance, the parents engaged in this moral panic do impact district decision-making. In chapter six of this dissertation, I describe how this conflict unfolds, arguing that parent racial ideologies impact their politics.

Chaos and Disruption

In addition to these three stories about institutions, race, and politics, I tell a fourth story

in this dissertation. This story is about the nature of exogenous shocks or disruptions. When I designed this project and began data collection, I was interested in how the election and presidency of Donald Trump would impact school culture around inequality. Indeed, the teachers and administrators in my study saw his presidency as a sea change in how they had to handle broader inequalities in school. In 2020, schools experienced yet another set of sea changes: the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the brutal police murder of George Floyd and subsequent racial justice uprisings. Once again, schools were called on to address inequality in a substantive way. While these issues certainly have to do with the subject matter in the prior section—maintaining political neutrality—both of these are major disruptions, and as such it is important to engage literatures and theories that seek to explain how to understand such events.

Scholars across many subfields have analyzed disruptions. First, organizational scholars call disruptions that occur outside the organization "exogenous shocks." These events "shock" the organization's set routines (Corbo et al. 2016). Political scientists have described how disruptions can open the door for "policy windows," in which ready-made policy ideas can be successfully marketed to stakeholders because of the particular moment in time (Kingdon and Stano 1984). Cultural sociologists have also conceptualized disruptions, calling them "unsettled times" (Swidler 1986). Swidler (1986:278–279) describes unsettled times as, "periods of social transformation," and she argues that "bursts of ideological activism occur in periods when competing ways of organizing action are developing or contending for dominance." Political sociologists have also argued that crisis can lead to institutional change (e.g., Mahoney 2000) and have described a similar distinction between "normal time" and a "critical juncture" (Hogan and Doyle 2007). Hogan and Doyle argue that a "critical juncture" consists of a crisis, a period of ideational change, and then a culminating policy change. While Swidler (1986) and political

sociologists (Hogan and Doyle 2007) have taken issue with the way some scholars have interpreted "unsettled times" or "critical junctures" too loosely, 2020–2021 certainly qualifies as distinctly "unsettled" compared to the years prior. Ultimately, while these theories come from divergent theoretical traditions, they each emphasize that big changes in society then tend to open the door for more change (Griswold 2012).

In the end, I find that the external changes of Trump's election, COVID-19, and the racial uprisings in summer 2020 forced school administrators and teachers to reaffirm and rearticulate the boundaries of the DEI Doctrine. Despite the fact that these external shocks opened the door for cultural, political, and organizational change in the district, the DEI Doctrine ultimately did not really shift. In my previous work, co-authors and I have argued that *constrained* disruptions are actually the most likely to move the needle in terms of organizational change in schools (Handsman et al. 2022). The findings here seem to support that hypothesis, as the overwhelming nature of these shocks might have prevented districts from making real, lasting change. This was only not the case in one district, Glory, which really handled the shock of COVID-19 *first,* rather than attempting to address both the pandemic and DEI issues simultaneously or too hurriedly. I extend previous work on disruptions in one additional way: I demonstrate how these exogenous shocks, paired with racial ideology and Republican parents' ideological tilt, opened the door for *moral panic* in addition to opening the door for questioning, rearticulating, or changing organizational norms.

METHODS

In order to answer my research questions, my dissertation relies on several kinds of original data. I analyzed three case study districts as well as a broader sample of 60 districts in the suburbs of Philadelphia. Each case study consisted of interviews, document analysis, and

virtual ethnography. Analysis of the broader sample of districts included documents and descriptive statistics. Importantly, this project faced several disruptions and challenges due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the societal response to George Floyd's murder drastically changed the context in which I was collecting data about equity initiatives. Despite these challenges, the data I was able to collect meets the threshold for answering my research questions.

Case Studies

Selection, access, and descriptions.

This dissertation focuses on three school districts as case studies, each of which is in a suburb of Philadelphia. The larger dataset I compiled consists of all suburban school districts across the state. Given that all major cities across the United States have suburbs, why does this dissertation focus on the Philadelphia (and other Pennsylvania) suburbs? When I began the process of school district selection, I considered three different suburban areas: the suburbs of Chicago, the suburbs of New York City, and the suburbs of Philadelphia. I began by grouping all suburban school districts in each area into the demographic categories shown in Table 1.

Table 1: District Selection Matrix

Racially diverse, low SES	Racially homogenous (white), low SES	Racially homogeneous (nonwhite), low SES
Racially diverse, high SES	Racially homogeneous (white), high SES	Racially homogeneous (nonwhite), high SES
Racially diverse, diverse SES	Racially homogeneous (white), diverse SES	Racially homogenous (nonwhite), diverse SES

In the end, I found the breakdown of school districts shown in Table 2.

Table 2: District Demographics outside Philadelphia, New York City, and Chicago

	Philadelphia	New York City	Chicago
Racially diverse, low SES	6	3	3
Racially diverse, high SES	1	11	6
Racially diverse, diverse SES	12	17	24
Majority white, low SES	4	0	1
Majority white, high SES	44	114	41
Majority white, diverse SES	20	14	9
Majority nonwhite, low SES	9	19	19
Majority nonwhite, high SES	1	5	4
Majority nonwhite, diverse SES	3	20	3

With these data, I ruled out the New York City suburbs because those districts were so disproportionately majority white, high SES. While both the Chicago and Philadelphia suburbs provided ample variation, I ultimately decided to study the Philadelphia suburbs for both academic and personal reasons. Philadelphia as a metro area has several attributes that make it an ideal location for this research. First, like Chicago, the suburbs of Philadelphia are both socioeconomically and racially diverse, which allowed me to create a sample of schools that had different demographic characteristics. Second, while Philadelphia's schools have been studied extensively, there has not been as much academic work done on Philadelphia's suburbs as there has on Chicago's suburbs. Evanston, with its prime location and connections to Northwestern, might have seemed like a natural case to study. However, because I was attempting to uncover the way school district workers thought and planned around equity, I was concerned that returning to a site used to dealing with researchers would change my results. Finally, and most

importantly, Pennsylvania is a swing state—and many towns in the Philadelphia suburbs are politically split between Democrats and Republicans, as demonstrated by the results of both the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. While political diversity was not something I considered in my original school selection matrix, I realized that it would be particularly interesting to study communities dealing with local tensions between polarized political ideals. In the end, the political heterogeneity in Philadelphia's suburbs allowed me to look at how schools navigated the tension between maintaining their values and maintaining political neutrality in a location where this tension was already salient before the culture clashes of 2020–2021.

Once I selected the Philadelphia suburbs, I went through and contacted representatives from each of the 100 districts in Delaware County, Bucks County, Montgomery County, and Camden County (New Jersey, but still includes towns that are suburbs of Philadelphia), receiving responses from eight schools. I did not have any pre-existing connections to these districts, so I tried to appeal to the districts' potential curiosity about their own equity work. Six out of the eight district leaders I heard back from were either doctoral candidates themselves or had recently completed their degrees. I believe this connection made them more inclined to try to help me out. Out of these eight, I chose three districts to begin the data collection process with in Fall 2019. While I had originally planned to include New Jersey districts that were still technically suburbs of Philadelphia, because so many aspects of education policy are state-based, in the end it was more logical to pursue only districts in one state. The three districts I ended up studying are: Carver School District, Jefferson School District, and Glory School District (all pseudonyms). Going into the project, I intended to study six districts, to cover as much of the matrix in Table One as possible. However, as I began interviewing (and even before the pandemic), it became clear to me that working with six districts and conducting 10–15

interviews with each would result in weaker data saturation than working with fewer districts but conducting more interviews and spending more time with each. Despite this realization, I did expect to include a total of four districts. However, around the time when I was supposed to begin interviews with the fourth district, the pandemic began, and it became too much of a burden on the fourth district to begin working with me at that time. Despite this setback, I was able to collect robust data from three school districts with significant variation in their racial, socioeconomic, and political demographics (see Table 3). I will now describe each district and then detail the specific data collection efforts.

Table 3: Case Study District Demographics

District	Race	SES	Political leaning
Carver School District	Diverse (between 50–65% white)	Diverse (between 25–40% free or reduced lunch)	Between 60–65% voted for Clinton in 2016
Jefferson School District	Majority white (over 65% white)	Diverse (between 25–40% free or reduced lunch)	Between 40–50% voted for Clinton in 2016
Glory School District	Majority white (over 65% white)	Affluent (under 25% free or reduced lunch)	Between 70–80% voted for Clinton in 2016

Carver School District is racially, socioeconomically, and even politically diverse. The district is located in the same town as a major shopping destination, meaning that it brings in quite a bit of extra tax revenue from malls and other shopping centers. This is a medium-sized district with several elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. The district is racially, socioeconomically, and politically diverse. As teachers and administrators describe it, the catchment area for Carver includes both affordable rental apartments and McMansions, although some affordable rentals have been bought out by luxury developers in recent years. Additionally, workers at Carver describe an influx of more transient students (meaning students who come in for a year or two and then leave), and they perceive this influx to be correlated with

the opioid crisis. Both teachers and administrators at Carver are very proud of the diverse student body that they serve, and serving diverse students well is a large part of their organizational identity. They are quick to explain that there are 15 different languages spoken in the schools, and that they celebrate diversity in lots of different ways throughout the year. Both before and after the shocks of 2020, they have maintained that they are dedicated to creating equity in their diverse district.

*Jefferson School Distric*t is majority white, socioeconomically diverse, and politically split. This is a large district is in Bucks County, which does not benefit from the same tax benefits from retail as Carver. The district has many elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. The socioeconomic diversity is salient for school workers and came up quite often in interviews. Participants often described this district as having a "right" side and "wrong" side of the railroad tracks with one side being fairly affluent and the other more socioeconomically diverse. While the students all come together for high school, their elementary school experiences are significantly segregated and unevenly resourced. Additionally, this district has been plagued with significant conflict. The district's superintendent was pushed out and forced to retire after his response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the administration has drawn ire from the community on both sides of the typical "culture war" issues. Diversity is not central to Jefferson's identity, but despite this, there are key administrators and teachers who have been engaged in DEI work both before and after the shocks of 2020.

Glory School District is majority white and affluent. This district is also in Montgomery County, though it is much closer to the Philadelphia border than Carver. It stands out from the other two districts for its size: It is a small school district. It is in a heavily Democrat-leaning

area (between 70–80% voted for Clinton in 2016 and Biden in 2020) that, as I mentioned, is close to the city border. This district is becoming increasingly diverse each year and is struggling to adapt to their changing population. Like Carver, Glory is intent upon closing the opportunity gap at their schools, and like Jefferson, the school is mostly white. Unlike both of these other districts, Glory is mostly made up of affluent families, and all students attend the same elementary, middle, and high schools. Similarly to Jefferson, *diversity,* as such, is not a key part of the organization's identity. However, similarly to Carver, there were widespread equity initiatives in place before 2020, and these were not dependent on a handful of individuals. The district is particularly proud of how they handle issues around sexual orientation, and school workers are quick to note that they were one of the first districts in the state to pass a policy allowing students to use whichever bathroom they felt matched their gender. However, this pride does not extend to their work on race and racism in the district, which is much more in progress. Finally, Glory stands out from the other two districts because of its active parent and youth groups that operate outside the school but are dedicated to influencing district decision-making.

Interviews.

I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with elementary, middle, and high school teachers from each district, as well as administrators at the school and district level. I conducted a total of 79 interviews, with 73 unique participants: 32 interviews with Carver participants, 18 with Jefferson participants, and 29 with Glory participants (Table 4; Table 5).

Table 4: Interviews by District

District	Interview number
Carver	32
Jefferson	20
Glory	29

Table 5: Interviews by Role and District

District	Teachers	School-level Administrator	District Administrator	Parent
Carver	17	2	5	4
Jefferson	10	1	7	2
Glory	12	7	5	3

In order to recruit teachers and administrators to participate in the study, I used a mixture of cold-emailing and snowball sampling methods. In each district, I began with a contact person in the district administration who then helped me recruit building administrators and teachers, to a certain extent. However, in order to avoid the selection bias that comes along with administrators cherry picking respondents, I sent emails to all teachers and building administrators to give all employees the chance to participate. There is still significant selection bias here as well, as the teachers and administrators willing to sacrifice their time to help me with this project tended to either have strong views (in either direction) about equity issues or have or be working on a doctorate themselves and were eager to help me.

The process of attracting participants also looked different from district to district. I began data collection at Carver, where one teacher, Maria, was very enthusiastic about my study. She spoke with me twice and has emailed and texted with me throughout the dissertation process to keep me abreast of ongoings at Carver. She recruited several teachers to my study in Fall 2019, most of whom were active in the DEI efforts Maria herself was active in. These were my first seven interviews at Carver. After this initial recruitment, I used more of a cold-emailing strategy to recruit individuals who were not in Maria's circle. After the chaos of 2020, I reached out to check in on Maria, and she once again recruited several teachers and parents to talk with me about Carver's response to Floyd's murder and to the pandemic. It is due to Maria's persistence that so many of my post-2021 interviews came from Carver.

Next, around a month later, I began interviews at Jefferson. Again, one administrator was particularly enthusiastic about my project, having recently completed her own dissertation. I interviewed her first, and while she did make some recommendations, I proceeded to mainly cold-email teachers and administrators, asking each participant for recommendations for who I should follow up with. This was a moderately successful effort in 2019. However, in late Summer 2020, Jefferson began using a new email system that blocked my messages from getting through to administrators or teachers. At that point, I turned to LinkedIn and Facebook groups to attempt to continue recruitment. I cold-messaged around 40 Jefferson teachers and administrators on LinkedIn and joined several Jefferson community Facebook groups, posting a call for interviews. I was able to recruit several more participants through these methods, but I was not as successful as I would have been had I been able to continue sending emails.

I began my interviews with Glory last, in the late days of 2019. Glory's high school principal was the invested party, and he and I spoke at length. He then offered to arrange several participants for me. I took him up on this offer, but it only resulted in three interviews. I proceeded to cold-email the faculty and administrators from Glory, which is how I gained most of my participants. I did ask my participants to recommend friends or colleagues they thought would be willing, and I followed up on these recommendations. These sometimes panned out and sometimes did not, so while I did use snowball sampling methods, I would not call this a true snowball sample.

Interviews took place between Fall 2019–Spring 2022, with the majority clustered in Fall 2019, Summer 2020, and Fall 2021. I conducted 15 interviews in person and the rest over the phone. Even before the onset of the pandemic, many participants preferred to speak to me on the phone, often while completing other chores: walking the dog, photocopying lesson materials, or

driving home from school. On the one hand, phone-based interviews certainly miss facial expressions and demeanor cues. On the other, I was happy to provide a convenient way for busy teachers to participate in the study. Once the pandemic began, it was a natural switch to conduct all interviews over the phone and record using the Tape-A-Call application.

The interviews themselves originally contained four sections: background and thoughts about the school, questions about the school's DEI efforts, questions about how both partisan politics and inequality come up at school, and an open-ended set of questions asking participants how they define equity. This structure stayed consistent through the 2019–2020 interviews, although I did add in some questions about COVID-19 and about district responses to Floyd's murder. In the 2021 interviews, I asked more direct questions about equity initiatives pre- and post-2020, and I added questions about the "critical race theory" backlash. I loosely followed this structure in the interviews but let participants guide the conversation to a certain extent. Sometimes they would bring up partisan politics before I asked, for example. I would simply let them continue their thought and circle back to the questions we had missed. In follow-up interviews, I would prepare by reading the transcript from the original interview and ask them specific questions about what had changed either in the district or in their mindset. I also gut-checked some of my preliminary findings at the end of a handful of follow-up interviews. I would relay one or two ideas I was thinking about and check with the participant to see if this rang true for their experiences at school.

Documents.

In addition to in-depth interviews, I collected several kinds of documents from each of the three districts. First, I collected policy documents, which included district comprehensive plans. Comprehensive Plans are policy documents that school districts across Pennsylvania have

to file every three years. This document includes school mission statements, shared values, and vision statements, as well as achievements and their plans for improvement in different areas. Additionally, I collected 832 Equity Policy documents from the three districts. The 832 Equity Policy was available to Pennsylvania school districts beginning in summer 2020. It is a customizable equity policy that school boards can edit and vote to adopt—all three case study districts voted on an 832 policy between 2020–2021, and they are included in the sample. In addition to these more formal policy documents, I downloaded and analyzed school-level policy handbooks, which include information like course descriptions, tracking policies, and other school rules and regulations. I also collected curriculum guides, and sometimes entire scopes and sequences, for social studies, history, and English K–12. Finally, I collected all communications with parents, planning documents, PowerPoint presentations, and information documents that had to do with equity in any way. In total, I collected and analyzed 106 documents, which together constituted thousands of pages of text.

Ethnography.

Initially, this was not meant to be an ethnographic project. However, the onset of the pandemic changed my plans, which I will discuss further in the "disruptions and limitations" section. In the summer of 2020, I decided to add virtual ethnography to my data collection efforts and began observing school board meetings as well as equity taskforce or equity committee meetings over Zoom. School board meetings are public events, and so access was not an issue. I was able to observe the meetings on Zoom in real time or watch meetings in the following weeks as they are publicly accessible on either Youtube or the districts' school board websites. School boards typically meet once (Carver, Jefferson) or twice (Glory) a month for a general meeting and then hold specific committee meetings either once a month or once every other month. I

determined which committee meetings would be relevant to my research area, and this differed by district as each district has its own titles for committees. As meeting minutes for the last few years are publicly available, I read four meeting minutes from each committee at each district to determine relevance for my study. I excluded meetings that looked at budget, transportation, or legal concerns as these rarely if ever touched on topics related to the project. I observed all relevant meetings between June 2020–January 2022, and these meetings ranged from 30 minutes to four hours, with most lasting around one to two hours. At Carver, I observed General Board meetings (14), Equity Taskforce meetings (4), Curriculum Committee meetings (4), and occasional one-off meetings related to either COVID-19 or equity efforts (3). At Jefferson, I observed School Board Action meetings (15), Education Committee meetings (15), and occasional one-off meetings related to COVID-19 and/or equity (2). At Glory, I observed General Board Meetings (32), Academic Affairs Committee meetings (4), and Equitable Practices meetings (4). This led to a total of 87 meetings observed.

In addition to observing meetings, I conducted virtual ethnographies of parent and community Facebook groups over the same time frame. I included two groups from each district and tried to find variation in political leaning. However, I was only able to find this variation for Carver and Jefferson; Glory leans too heavily Democrat to have an active, Republican parent Facebook group. These groups all required admission by the moderators. I was honest and wrote in my form that I was a graduate student conducting research on the districts. I also posted in each group introducing myself and letting parents know that they could contact me if they were interested in participating in the study. I recruited around five interview participants through these methods. I compiled fieldnotes on my observations of both the meetings and the Facebook groups in three documents, one for each district. I took my fieldnotes in chronological order, so

my notes on September 2020's school board meetings, for example, line up with my notes on the Facebook groups from the same time period.

Broader Sample

Selection, access, and description.

In addition to the three in-depth case study districts, I wanted this data to be contextualized in a broader sample of suburban school districts. While my original dataset plan did not come to fruition (I discuss this further in the "disruptions and limitations" section), I still managed to look at a sample broader than my three case studies: the 60 suburban school districts in Montgomery, Bucks, and Delaware County, Pennsylvania. I found these 60 districts through the federal Common Core of Data and double checked that I had a complete list using Google searches for each county. Overall, these districts had variation in race, SES, and political leaning, although they were disproportionately majority white and affluent, as displayed in Figures 1–3 below.

Figure 1: Racial Makeup of Districts

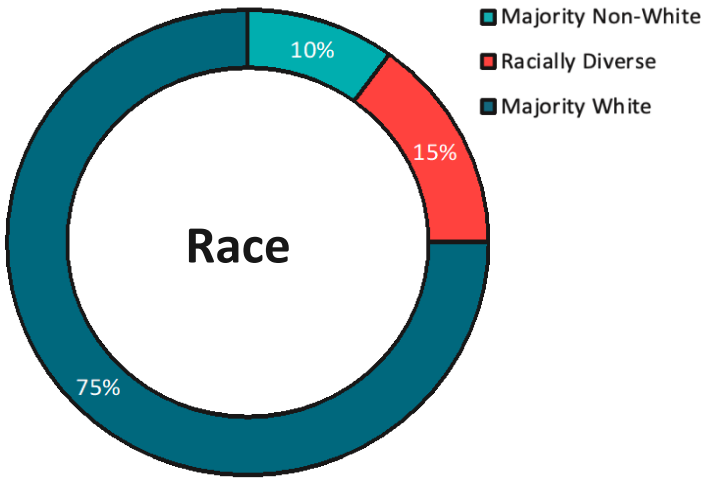


Figure 2: Socioeconomic Makeup of Districts

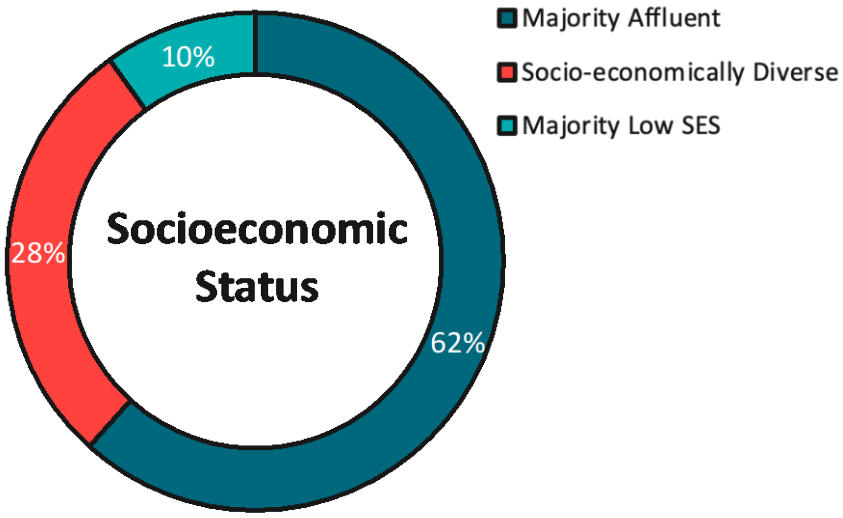
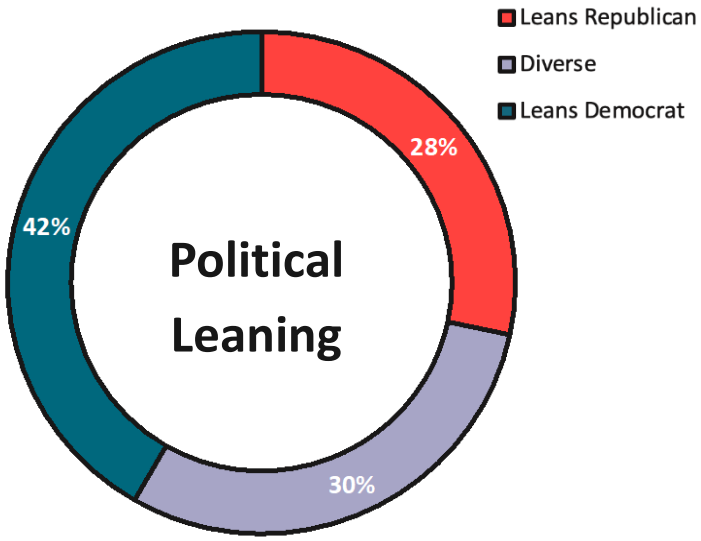


Figure 3: Political Makeup of Districts



I collected several kinds of documents from these 60 districts. First, I collected common policy documents: comprehensive plans and 832 policies. Second, I collected any public documents addressing districts' DEI commitments. These included plans, communications with families, value statements, and commitment statements, in addition to the 832 policies. I found all of these documents through searching each district's website. Finally, I collected

demographic information about each district, including racial and socioeconomic makeup of each (identified using the Common Core of Data) and political leaning of each (identified using voting results from the 2016 presidential election).

ANALYSIS

I analyzed the interview transcripts, field notes, and documents in Atlas.ti. This analysis took place in several waves throughout the data collection process. The first "wave" of analysis took place in Summer 2020 after conducting the first 46 interviews and collecting documents. Following Deterding and Waters (2018), I used a flexible coding approach. I began by categorizing documents by "attributes," such as teacher, administrator, and school district. As I added more interviews and more documents to the dataset following 2020, I also added attributes for pre- and post-2020. I then used Deterding and Waters' (2018) suggested method to index the data, coding large chunks of interviews with ideas like "diversity," "partisan politics," "tracking/coursetaking," "curriculum," and "visions of equity." I followed this method with the documents as well. I then used a combination of ideas from previous literature (for example, Allbright et al.'s [2018] ideas about conceptions of equity and Mayorga-Gallo's (2019) ideas about diversity ideology) and my own memos and fieldnotes to begin analytical coding of each chunk of data. This occurred in waves, as I mentioned up front: I began coding in Summer 2020, did another round in Summer 2021, and the final round in Fall 2021. This final round also included fieldnotes from my virtual ethnography. Each wave of coding resulted in new and consolidated codes, and I did my best to go back and clean up my original coding.

I began downloading and analyzing comprehensive plans for the 60 surrounding districts in Fall 2020. I coded these documents for demographic categories (race, SES, and political leaning), and then used the same analytic codes as I used in my interviews to analyze the rest of

the document. By Spring 2021, as it was clear that the shock of Floyd's murder had led to an explosion of new and reinvigorated DEI efforts across the country, I decided to go back to each district's website and download any DEI-related documents that I could find. I began this process in Summer 2021 and completed it in Fall 2021. I then coded these DEI-related documents, using many of the same analytic codes. However, I also included codes labeling new DEI initiatives, references to pre-2020 DEI initiatives, and notable *absence* of DEI initiatives. Using these codes, I added variables to the sample I took from the Common Core of Data. These included: political leaning, pre-2020 DEI initiatives, new DEI initiatives, absence of DEI initiatives, as well as codes for equity roles, equity consultants, and naming Black Lives Matter. I then calculated some descriptive statistics in Stata. These included various correlations between demographic categories and equity initiatives.

POSITIONALITY

My position as a young, white, politically left-leaning, female researcher from an upper-middle-class background certainly played a role in determining both the data I collected and my analysis, for several reasons. First, the majority of administrators in suburban schools are also white women, which, combined with the fact that many of them had recently completed their doctoral work, allowed them to identify and relate to me. This certainly played a role in gaining access to the case study districts. Within the interviews themselves, white participants often confided in me like a co-conspirator, sharing views on race, inequality, and equity that were not necessarily "pc." Participants often assumed that I agreed with them or was implicitly endorsing their mindset. On the other hand, while the sample is mostly white, the few teachers, administrators, and parents of color who participated might not have felt comfortable sharing vulnerable experiences with me.

Analytically, my position certainly biases me in both conscious and unconscious ways. As a white scholar who studies inequality, I made an explicit decision to study teachers and administrators in two majority white and one racially diverse school district. While I hope that my contributions help us better understand how inequality reproduces in these spaces, I am acutely aware that there are many aspects of inequality that I might not understand, given my various racial and socioeconomic privileges. I did my best to counter these unseen areas by reading broadly. However, I am sure that my interpretation of data was influenced by the lenses through which I move through the world. Additionally, my own politics lean left, and this certainly played a role in my interpretation and analysis of data, especially in the chapters on political neutrality in schools (chapters 4 and 6).

DISRUPTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The disruptions that impacted day-to-day life for school districts also inevitably impacted my data collection and analysis. When the pandemic began in Spring 2020, I had conducted 46 interviews and begun collecting documents. I had employed three research assistants during the previous summer who had worked on the school districts in my original 1500-district sample of suburban schools. When schools made the decision to go virtual, I made the decision to stop soliciting interviews, at least through the rest of the school year. Instead, I began analyzing the interviews I had, began observing school board meetings, and continued work on the Pennsylvania dataset. Then, when George Floyd's murder resulted in such strong societal response—and this societal response took the form of DEI initiatives—I realized that I had found myself and my study in the "after" portion of a massive societal change I had not anticipated.

Unlike a true "before and after" research design, in which I would have conducted an organized and equal number of interviews at each district in 2019 and finalized the 1500-district

dataset as well, I had to make some difficult decisions about how to best capture the moment we were all living through in my data. Once I realized that districts were almost unilaterally changing or reinvigorating the way they were doing DEI work, I knew that the dataset work my research assistants and I had done in 2019 would no longer be valid, except potentially as a comparison point. I decided to have new research assistants collect 2021 data. I also realized it would be important to try to re-interview key participants in order to get a true sense of how things were changing in the districts. Finally, I decided to continue observing school board meetings and equity meetings because this was a way I could keep tabs on the districts without asking overburdened teachers and administrators to give up any of their time.

Some of these plans succeeded and some did not. The dataset, notably, suffered the most. I was unable to use the rest of my funds from the graduate school to pay research assistants in 2021 and had to make the difficult decision to prioritize interviews, observing school board meetings, and taking a closer look at the changes over time in the 60 surrounding districts rather than compiling this data myself. I certainly learned an incredibly amount about how long these various aspects of data collection take. I was, however, able to re-interview several key participants and add an additional 33 interviews to the sample between Summer 2020 and Winter 2022. I was also able to add observations of 87 district meetings. This data was not in my prospectus at all, but I am very glad I decided to collect it. While, for the most part, the study looks at structural elements of schooling, parents (and the broader public and community) do play a major role in schooling decisions—especially decisions around political neutrality. I do not think those chapters would have been nearly as complete without this data.

SUMMARY AND CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Although equity and DEI have become reinvigorated in the last year, there is hardly ever

any talk of what equity means, beyond the cartoon-related definition that poses equity in opposition to equality. In order to address this question of meaning-making, it was necessary to bring together ideas from many different areas of research. In the end, I weave these divergent literatures from the sociology of education, institutional theory, sociology of race and racism, and sociology of culture together to clarify just how teachers and administrators define inequality in their schools, and then, in turn, define their visions of *equity*. I find that teachers and administrators are guided by institutional myths that enforce a commitment to reducing and educating about inequality. These values, combined with their extant racial ideology focused on diversity, determine and constrain the way they understand inequality, which, in turn constrains their visions of equity. In the end, they understand inequality as a lack of representational diversity, meaning that *equity* ultimately means creating that representational diversity. I examine how this plays out in terms of advanced course taking and curricular content. At times, this vision of equity conflicts with another institutional myth, political neutrality. At these junctures, teachers and administrators must adjudicate between these two myths. This came up especially following two major cultural changes in the way the districts dealt with inequality—first Trump's 2016 election and second the 2020 racial justice uprisings.

I develop this argument over the course of five empirical chapters. In the next three chapters, I establish the DEI Doctrine, spending one chapter discussing and providing evidence for each tenet. In the second chapter, I demonstrate how the institutional myths guiding suburban schools necessitate their commitment to both ameliorating inequality and educating students about inequalities that exist in society. In the third chapter, I demonstrate how institutional myths interact with racial ideology to result in DEI initiatives that focus on representational diversity. I show how administrator and teacher conceptions of equity translate to initiatives and policies in

the realm of academic achievement in order to create representational diversity in advanced courses as well as diversity in curricular content. These policies are either subtractive (focused on removing barriers) or additive (focused on adding in structural supports) but do not attempt to make structural change. I argue that these policies are not, as Ray (2019) would predict, decoupled from day-to-day school life, but are implemented with fidelity. In the fourth chapter, I demonstrate how changing norms during Trump's 2016 campaign and election made it so that DEI initiatives previously seen as politically neutral were suddenly seen as politicized by the right. I illustrate how school districts responded to these changes by focusing on rearticulating their neutrality.

In the fifth and sixth chapters, I address how the DEI Doctrine holds up during moments of crisis by analyzing how the school districts coped with the dual shocks of COVID-19 and Floyd's murder. In the fifth chapter, I illustrate how the three districts' varied organizational capacities determined their responses to calls for racial justice, and that ultimately, two out of three remained focus on representational diversity despite the opportunity for change. In the sixth chapter, I address the Republican backlash to these initiatives, including the uproar against "critical race theory." I describe the contours of this backlash, as well as the politics of Democrat parents. I find that the strategies districts put in place after 2016 carried through to the present, ultimately allowing Republican families to determine what "counts" as political in school. In the concluding chapter, I summarize the empirical chapters and then explore the theoretical, empirical, and practical contributions of this work.

Chapter 2: Districts' Commitment to Reducing and Educating About Inequality

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Throughout these first three chapters, I will provide evidence for what I call the DEI Doctrine: a set of rules that guide how suburban school districts outside Philadelphia respond to inequality. In this chapter, I will elaborate on the first tenet—that suburban school district workers (teachers, building administrators, and district administrators) have a core professional responsibility to both reduce and educate about inequality. It is an open question whether districts, such as the ones in my study, that are achieving passable scores on standardized tests and other quantifiable measures truly feel the need to ameliorate inequality in their schools. While some scholars have argued that school workers do feel this responsibility (e.g., Turner 2020), I deviate from that previous work by demonstrating how this responsibility is connected to larger schooling goals. Similarly, while scholars have argued that teaching students about social inequality is important (Cech 2017), it is an open question whether suburban schools feel that teaching about this topic is within their responsibility as educators. In this chapter, I use data from 60 school districts' comprehensive planning documents in addition to interview data from three case study districts to demonstrate that suburban school personnel have an institutional commitment to at least attempt to fulfill both of these responsibilities—reducing inequality in school outcomes *and* educating about broader inequalities in society.

Lush, manicured greenery in the streets; towering McMansions; spacious, upscale stores; white, affluent families who send their children to extremely high-performing schools—these are some of the images that come to mind when picturing "the suburbs" in the United States. However, this image is largely outdated; suburbs have become increasingly racially and socioeconomically diverse in recent years. Between 2000 and 2012–2016, there was a 51%

increase in low SES residents of suburbs, and a 15% increase in people of color between 2010–2020 (Pew 2018). As the suburbs have diversified, so too have suburban schools, leading to "achievement gaps" or "opportunity gaps" that had previously been identified *between* schools to surface *within* these integrated, suburban schools. With this project, I take a step toward evaluating the culture of suburban schools by examining the ideas, values, and commitments that guide the choices these districts make. While this might not translate directly to cultural beliefs existing *outside* the school walls, it is an important step in understanding the way these organizations managed their changing demographics. Throughout this dissertation, I will make several arguments about how suburban schools' proclaimed values (institutional myths) guided, limited, and otherwise determined these districts' equity work. However, before I can delve into the arguments about how these myths *operated,* I will illustrate *what these myths were.*

A burgeoning group of scholars in the sociology of education have explored the demographic changes in the suburbs and the consequences for inequality in schools. Scholars assert that most students in the United States go to school in the suburbs, and due to the changing demographics in the suburbs, researchers should be paying attention to these locations for important insights on race, place, and inequality (Diamond and Posey-Maddox 2020; Diamond, Posey-Maddox, and Velázquez 2021). The previous studies on consequences for schooling find, overall, that students of color (and working class students) do not have the same experiences in suburban schools as their white, affluent peers. Instead, they are often shunted into lower-leveled classes (Lewis and Diamond 2015) and disciplined more often and more harshly (Lewis and Diamond 2015; Lewis-McCoy 2014). These students also experience the *place* of the suburbs differently; the suburbs are not "the promised land" (Lewis-McCoy 2014) but instead an exclusionary space where students of color and lower SES students do not necessarily feel

welcome (Foley 2021; Ispa-Landa and Conwell 2014). Turner (2020) demonstrates that when school districts were confronted with increasing diversity, they responded with "colorblind managerial" policies that reinforced racist structures.

What remains underexplored, however, is how suburban school districts conceptualize *inequality itself* as it becomes more of an aspect of their schools.[3] Many sociologists investigate the nature of inequality, describing problems or aspects of stratification, identifying how this occurs, and making suggestions about how to ameliorate it. In my work, I take it as a given—based on all this extensive and rigorous previous work—that inequality existed in these districts. I am interested instead in whether these school districts were a) aware of the inequality (they were); b) working to fix the inequality (they were attempting this); and c) what that work looked like, what problems or roadblocks arose as they attempted this equity work, and what they saw as their role in fixing inequality in their schools and in society. In this first section, I take up the latter question—what did school district personnel see as their responsibility in this arena? Was fixing inequality even important to them? As a sociologist, I ask this question from an *organizational* and *institutional* perspective. I did not perform a psychological evaluation or administer a lie detector test to determine if fixing inequality was important to the individuals I interviewed. Instead, I approach this at the structural or group level—as an *institution,* is fixing inequality "important" to suburban schools? I put "important" in quotation marks because that is not quite the right word. Rather, I am asking here, whether fixing inequality is part of suburban school districts' institutional responsibilities, which would, in turn, make it part of administrators' and teachers' *professional* responsibilities. Whether or not they are *successful* at

[3] While Turner's (2020) work does certainly touch on this, her focus is on general responses to increasing diversity, not responses to inequality. Additionally, her fieldwork took place in 2009–2010, and there have been several extreme changes to society in the intervening decade between our two periods of data collection.

this professional responsibility is a different question entirely. All of the school personnel that I interviewed communicated that it was part of their job to both reduce and educate about inequality. However, it is possible that they could have been simply telling me what they thought I wanted to hear. Here, I demonstrate that this commitment around inequality went beyond what participants said in interviews. This shows that the commitment truly existed at the institutional level, guiding school district decision-making.

It is important to broaden the inquiry by giving some background about beliefs about schooling in general. Many scholars have addressed this question, arguing that schools are tools for socialization (Bourdieu 1973; Durkheim 1961) as well as arenas where larger societal moral conflicts get worked out (Labaree 2008; Apple 1993; Vergari 2000). We expect schools to prepare students to take on their roles in society, which are often determined by their extant class status (Bowles and Gintis 1976), but at the same time, we expect schools to be "the great equalizer," providing equal opportunity to all students. We expect schools to individualize the learning experience, providing for each child what they might specifically need, and we also expect schools to be egalitarian spaces in which one's race, class, gender, religion, or other identities do not determine one's success (Lipset 1996). We expect schools to be politically neutral spaces, not "taking sides" on partisan issues, while, at the same time, any decision made in regards to the socialization of children into society is inherently political (Apple 1993). Schools exist in these multiple layers of conflicts, and suburban schools are no exception. Instead, I argue, they *exemplify* these contradictions, for a few reasons. First, suburban schools are supposed to be the ideal type—the kinds of schools urban and rural schools aspire to. They are also well resourced and can therefore implement all sorts of programs and interventions other kinds of schools can only dream of. Finally, suburbs themselves represent an aspect of the

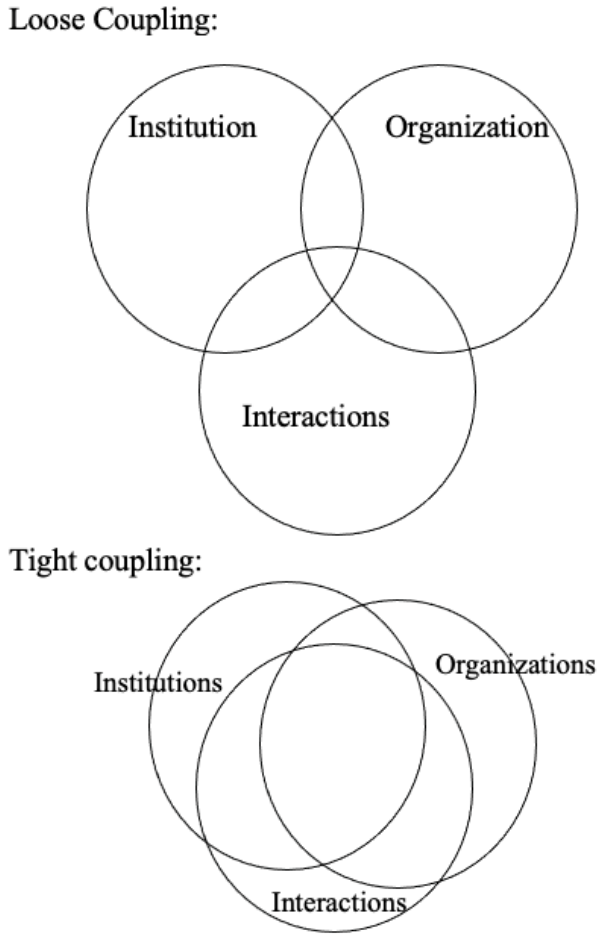
American Dream, the end-goal for capitalistic endeavors. It is almost a given, then, that the *schools* in these communities would serve an important symbolic role—the way we educate our most *prized* students demonstrates something important about our goals for our society overall (Hunter 2000).

So, taken together, what does all of this mean? First, understanding suburbs is essential for understanding American society. In order to understand suburbs, it makes sense to pay close attention to suburban *schools* because schools are where we determine who the next generation of our society will be: what values will we hold, what knowledge will we prize, which students will be successful and how will we determine success? Perhaps most importantly, where are the fractures of inequality coming through? Second, suburbs are *changing* and have changed, which makes understanding them both more difficult and even more essential. They are no longer the domain of the white and affluent exclusively, which means that the schools have changed as well, and, as other scholars have demonstrated, even more of those cracks of inequality are exposed.

In order to explore both of these important points, I rely on an institutional theory framework. Institutional theory posits that institutions, or "social forms or templates composed of clusters of conventions that script behavior to varying degrees in given contexts" (Barley 2008:495) are governed by myths that guide structures, rules, and routines across organizations existing within the same institutional field. As Tim Hallett and Amelia Hawbaker (2020:4) write, "institutional myths are widespread cultural ideas that provide a rational theory of how organizations ought to operate." These myths exist at the institutional level, creating isomorphic trends—or trends that are similar in process or structure—between organizations within the institution as the organizations all attempt to comply with these myths.

Hallett and Hawbaker's (2020) inhabited institutionalist framework explains that within the institutional field there are institutions, organizations, and interactions, which they represent as three spheres with various levels of overlap (Figure 4). In this case, interactions among district leaders guide and are guided by both organizational capacity and institutions, and, in turn, organizations and institutions are co-constitutive in the same way. They hypothesize that depending on the circumstances, there can be tight or loose overlap between each of these spheres. The level of overlap between the spheres represents tight or loose coupling.

Figure 4: Tight and Loose Coupling as Conceptualized by Hallett and Hawbaker (2020)



Given previous findings (e.g., Hallett 2010; Coburn 2004), I expect that these institutional myths have generous overlap (or, tighter coupling) with organizations and the

individuals inside them. This is a hypothesis that cannot be proven by comprehensive plans alone but is confirmed by interview data. Regardless of the level of coupling, though, institutional myths help us understand the commitments that districts must at least superficially make.

How, though, can we tell what these myths are? On the one hand, we could infer the myths from the actions schools take on the ground or from participants' responses to interview questions. On the other hand, we can evaluate areas in which school districts are ostensibly different because they serve different demographic populations to see where they are isomorphic. I take a combined approach here, using a content analysis of suburban Pennsylvania schools' comprehensive plans as well as data from my interviews with teachers and administrators at my three case study school districts. In the rest of this chapter, I will establish the current institutional myths governing the organizations of suburban schools. I will establish these myths through an analysis of 60 school districts' written, public policies and published values.

While institutional theorists have argued that these sorts of public-facing statements of values are performative and actually decoupled from day-to-day goings-on in organizations, analyzing what they are *performing* still gives me analytical purchase for understanding what these districts aspire to. I will challenge this assertion in later chapters, but for now, I will use this logic to work backwards to identify the institutional myths governing suburban schools. If these schools are "performing" compliance with or allegiance to institutional myths in these public-facing documents, then analyzing the commonalities between those documents (and there should be several, as Meyer and Rowan [1977] also argue that organizations existing within the same institutional field are isomorphic) should provide evidence for the myths themselves, if not evidence for those myths actually being meaningful in day-to-day life at school. Finally, I argue that institutional myths directly determine professional responsibilities. Overall, in this chapter, I

ask and answer the following questions:

1. Do suburban school districts share common institutional myths?
2. If so, what are those myths?
3. What are the potential consequences of these myths for inequality? That is, is ameliorating inequality an important professional responsibility for teachers and administrators, given the institutional myths that guide their decision-making?

As expected, I find that these districts do, in fact, share official values or institutional myths, although there is some variation in how they are expressed and the specific values that they describe. I also find that ameliorating inequality is in fact an important professional responsibility for teachers and administrators, given the myths that guide and constrain their professional lives. In addition, I find that the responsibilities around inequality do not stop within the walls of the school. Instead, the common institutional myths demonstrate that suburban school districts also have a professional responsibility to *educate* students about the inequalities that exist in society*,* and this responsibility is not limited to (or even directed to, for the most part) the diversity of the districts' student bodies. This responsibility is instead in regards to preparing students to be effective, productive, and responsible in a diverse *society.* While certainly a responsibility to teach about diversity is not the same as a responsibility to teach about inequality, they are still linked (especially given that increased diversity *within* districts has led to increased *inequality* within districts). The most significant values—the ones that stand out across many of the 60 districts—help to paint a picture of how and why suburban schools are concerned about inequality. The most commonly shared values include: achievement, preparing students for global society, community, diversity, and character (with a focus on individualism). These values, which were pulled from school district mission and vision statements, paint a

picture of what suburban schools in Pennsylvania envisioned for themselves in terms of their success as organizations. These declared values together explain districts' sense of responsibility toward diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Finally, it is important to note here that this chapter is focused on the time before COVID-19 and before reckoning with racism around the murder of George Floyd—events that certainly made inequality and both racism and racial equity, specifically, more of a focal point for organizations in all sectors. I will discuss the impact this had on suburban districts' institutional myths in the latter half of the dissertation. In the rest of the chapter, I will first address the data and methods I use to make this argument, and then I will discuss the common institutional myths I find and explain how these myths add up to a professional responsibility toward working to fix inequality.

DATA AND METHODS

In this chapter, I rely largely on analysis of policy documents from the 60 suburban school districts in Montgomery County, Bucks County, and Delaware County, Pennsylvania. I collected "comprehensive plans" from each of these districts, in addition to demographic data and school performance data from each district. The comprehensive plans are between 70–115 pages each and contain districts' mission statement, vision statement, and shared values, along with their noted accomplishments, areas for improvement, and improvement plans. These plans cover a span of four years. These plans were all crafted between 2018–2019 and so are relics from a time before COVID-19, and a time before the police murder of George Floyd sparked a moment of uprising against racism in the United States. In addition to these plans, this chapter will use interview data from the three case study districts to build the overall argument around institutional myths across Pennsylvania suburbs in general. These policy documents can be analyzed systematically because they all follow the same format, including three "values

statements." These are: mission statements, vision statements, and a statement of shared values. While only one has "values" in the name, these three categories are each a chance for districts to proclaim what they see as their professional responsibilities and organizational values. The districts interpret the three categories somewhat differently; one district's mission statement might look like another's vision statement, etc. However, between and across these three categories, there is significant overlap in the *content* of the values they list. Additionally, while about a third of the document is dedicated to special education and therefore not relevant to the study, the rest of the documents contain districts' assessments of their successes and their areas for improvement.

I performed a content analysis of these comprehensive plans in Atlas.ti using a combined inductive and deductive coding strategy of my own design. I read each plan three times, at minimum. During the first reading, I coded for broader categories like "mission statement, "vision statement," "values," and "achievement gap." After this first round, I coded within these broader categories, looking for any mention of particular values or character traits. Some of these I coded inductively, by noticing trends in the documents. For example, many documents mentioned "life long learning" which I had not anticipated. Others, I went into the coding process expecting to find. For example, given previous research on character education, I expected to find a long list of specific character traits (e.g. Handsman 2021; Hunter 2000). I coded these character traits both within a broader "character" code and with a specific code for each trait, in order to generate a count of the most commonly mentioned character traits. I also coded any mention of achievement *gaps* separately from mentions of achievement in and of itself. I then generated analytic memos through which I analyzed similarities between some of the most commonly mentioned values. Through this process, I discovered the shared focus on

individualism and individuality shared by many of the districts. I conducted the third round of coding as I revised this chapter. In this final round, I consolidated and fine-tuned some codes, and checked the veracity of the codes one final time. I then used analytic tools in Atlas.ti to count the number of times certain codes arose in the sample. Looking at these assessments helps paint a picture of what districts see as issues versus what they do not feel obligated to report on. While the policy documents offer the specific, official, and public language school districts use to describe their commitments, participants echo these commitments more casually (or in their own words) in interviews.

FINDINGS

As was mentioned at the end of the introduction, schools in this region held official commitments to several values. In the remainder of this chapter, I will first demonstrate that many of these districts *do* hold shared values. Next, I will describe the most commonly shared values. Then, I will explore the potential consequences of these shared values for districts' approaches to inequality.

Finally, and most explicitly relevant for this project, the collected values that school districts promoted add up to a fundamental professional responsibility toward fixing inequality through DEI efforts. I demonstrated how the various institutional myths shared among school districts provide evidence that school districts have a professional responsibility to reduce and educate about inequality. While it is impossible to determine *causality* from this data alone, I interpret the commitment to DEI as resulting from schools trying to meet their commitment to achievement and excellence. It is important to note here that districts might have used slightly different language from one another, but overall were committed to many of the same goals that coalesce around these broad themes.

Isomorphism among Suburban Districts and their Institutional Myths

In terms of districts' stated values and responsibilities, they had, as Meyer and Rowan (1977) would predict, some similarities. As is detailed in Figure 5, 46 out of the 60 districts mentioned achievement, excellence, or success; 41 mentioned diversity; 40 mentioned a global society; 33 mentioned community; and all 60 mentioned *some* character trait or another. In Figure 6, I highlight the most frequently mentioned values, collapsing individuality, independence, passion, and uniqueness into one category labeled "individualism," which results in 29 districts mentioning a character trait related to individualism. Districts' value statements ranged from sparse, only including one or two words, to some that included up to 15 values. Some of the districts that did *not* mention common ideas like diversity, global society, or community simply had very brief and non-descriptive statements. Additionally, 43 districts specifically mentioned an achievement gap between white students and students of color. Out of the 17 that did not mention an achievement gap, 11 mentioned improving achievement levels more broadly. That left only 6 districts that did not mention achievement at all. I will now describe the most frequently mentioned values or institutional myths, giving illustrative examples from the comprehensive plans. I will demonstrate how the various myths come together to underlie a responsibility toward both fixing inequality and educating about inequality, both of which tend to happen through DEI initiatives.

Figure 5: Frequencies of Values Listed in Comprehensive Plans

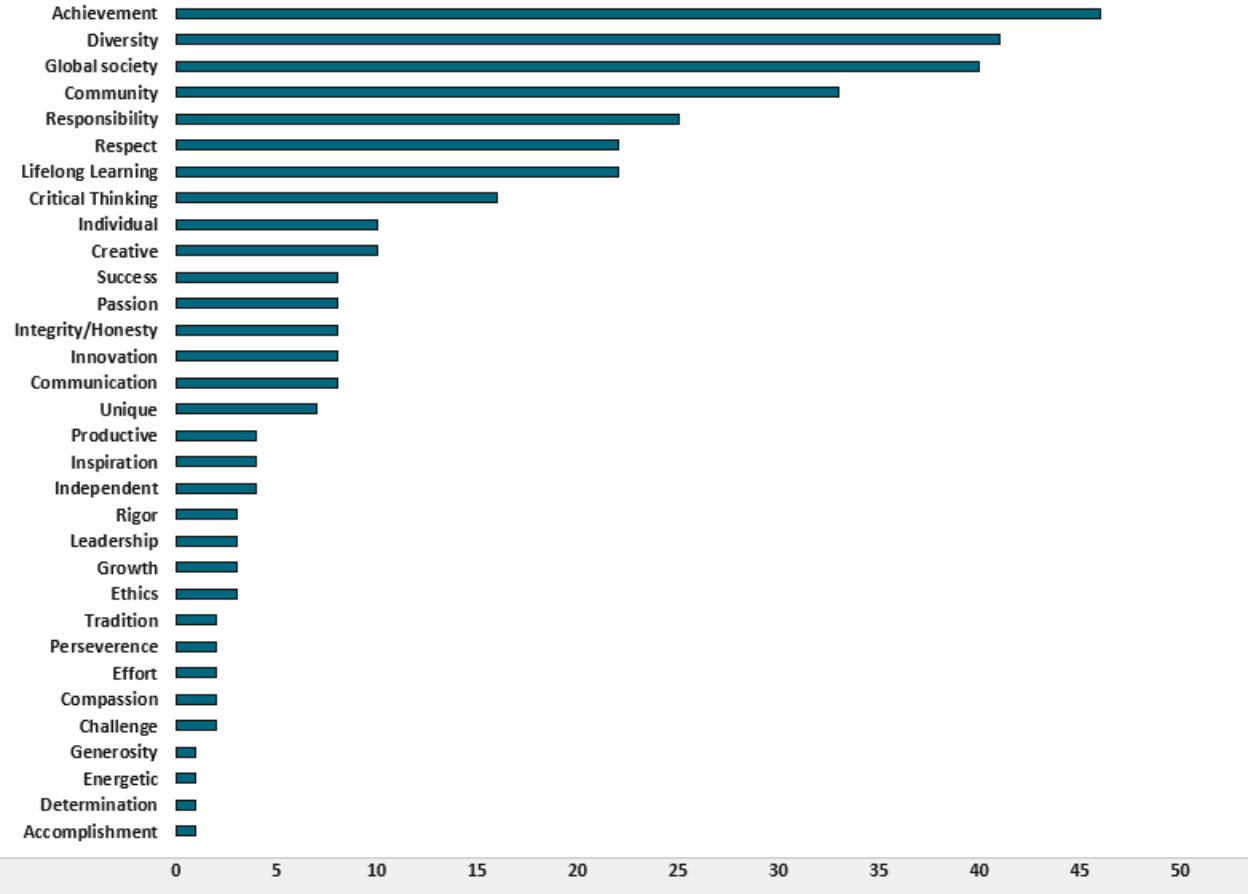
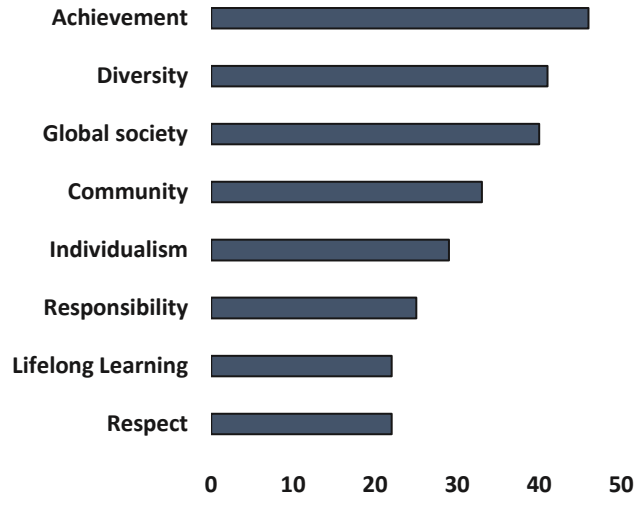


Figure 6: Most Frequently Emphasized Values in Comprehensive Plans



Description of Districts' Shared Institutional Myths

Achievement and excellence.

All districts demonstrated committed to student achievement, as measured by standardized test scores, graduation rates, college acceptance rates, and other forms of quantifiable data. This was, to a certain extent, a legal commitment: The comprehensive planning documents were required to list areas districts were struggling with along with plans for improvement. This commitment was built into the structure of the document: Districts were expected to outline areas of success and areas of improvement, and those successes and struggles all centered achievement. Additionally, student achievement and growth made up a significant portion of the PA Student Performance Profile, a measure by which schools were evaluated in the state. Given that, there is really no way that school districts could *avoid* a commitment to achievement. For example, Methatcon's (majority white, affluent school district) Comprehensive Plan states: "Methatcon School District has consistently maintained levels of achievement above the state average." Another example, from a racially and socioeconomically diverse school district, says the following: "There is a need to continue to improve the Academic Achievement of each child in the Bristol School District." These exemplify the responsibilities school districts have to prioritize student achievement.

If that was the end of it, there would be almost no reason to bring up "achievement" here at all. However, in addition to discussing achievement in the legally obligated parts of the comprehensive plans, 46 districts also discuss achievement in their mission statements, vision statements, or shared values. This looks slightly different across districts, but the message is remarkably similar: Every student should have the *opportunity for academic achievement.* The importance placed on student achievement in the United States following the No Child Left Behind Act really cannot be overstated, as school district funding became tied to standardized

test scores.[4] Therefore, this is not a surprising finding. However, it is important to include because it is the *most* stated goal across mission statements and, in interviews, clearly underlies all of the other decisions districts make. For example, one district's mission statement includes, "we promote excellence as our standard," and one Jefferson teacher explained that the most important value held by the school was "for kids to achieve."

Character, individualism, and individuality.

Every school district in the sample stated that imparting some kind of character trait or skill to their students was an important aspect of their mission, vision, or shared values. This is not altogether surprising, as character education has been a significant part of American schooling for many years (Handsman 2021; Hunter 2000). The specific character traits ranged from being relatively common—for example, responsibility came up 25 times throughout the comprehensive plans, and respect and lifelong learning came up 22 times each—to relatively unique—for example, only two districts mentioned tradition and only one district aimed to produce "energetic" students. Altogether, across the 60 districts in the region, mission statements listed the following values, traits, or skills, including: respect (22), responsibility (25), lifelong learning (22), individuality (10), creativity (10), innovation (8), passion (8), integrity/honesty (8), communication (8), uniqueness (7), inspiration (4), independence (4), productivity (4), leadership (3), growth (3), ethics (3), compassion (2), perseverance (2), effort (2), tradition (2), challenge (2), energy (1), generosity (1), and determination (1).

The values districts attempted to impart to their students are evidence for the *kinds of citizens* suburban schools were aiming to produce. This is important as it helps to better make

[4] While there certainly were concerns about student achievement before the passage of No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, these concerns were *formalized* by this policy, which based school funding on meeting improvement goals.

sense of the larger institutional myths at play. Taken together, many of the values districts aimed to impart had to do with individuality or individualism: individuality, uniqueness, independence, and passion. In total, just under half the districts included a character trait explicitly tied to individualism or individuality, making this the most common traits districts were focused on.

This is not a surprising finding. In *American Exceptionalism: A Double-edged Sword,* Seymour Lipset (1997: 128) describes the value of individualism as "individual freedom and the social need for mobility and achievement." He discusses this value in opposition to egalitarianism, which focuses on equality of outcomes rather than opportunity. This focus also confirms what the literature would predict about the goals of schooling. David Labaree (1997) argues that while the goals of schooling have changed over time, these goals have evolved to focus on social mobility. He explains, "the social mobility approach to schooling argues that education is a commodity, the only purpose of which is to provide individual students with a competitive advantage in the struggle for desirable social positions" (Labaree 1997:42).

In the matter of the contest between egalitarianism and individualism, then, it makes sense that suburban school districts are firmly on the side of individualism; they subscribe to the notion that every individual child should succeed or achieve to their best potential and that this potential will range. This is meritocratic logic: Not *all* students can be high achievers, but in an ideal system, every potential high achiever would have the opportunity to reach that potential, and everyone else would simply reach their own personal best. This kind of logic allows room for uneven or stratified academic outcomes (standardized test scores, grades, etc.). However, this value is in conflict with academic outcomes that are stratified by race or socioeconomic status (SES) because, without believing in racist and classist theories like the culture of poverty (Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010), this stratification exposes a problem with the opportunity structure

in the district. I will discuss this claim in more depth in the following section of the chapter, but a concern for an achievement gap by race or socioeconomic status is built into the comprehensive plan documents as well. Areas of improvement that districts noted included both overall achievement and specific areas of disproportionate underperformance for certain demographic groups. Additionally, in interviews, school workers emphasized that this disproportionality was one of the biggest problems they were trying to solve. For example, Morrisville's mission statement stated that they were "expanding horizons and individualizing excellence for each and every student." They emphasized excellence, of course, but also that this excellence would look different depending on the student. This focus on individualism is not inherent in schooling; alternatively, schools could be focused on a baseline equality of outcomes, which would emphasize the collective rather than the individual.

In addition to this focus on individualism, districts were also focused on a different but related idea: individuality. While individualism was part of the districts' broader philosophical approach to schooling, *individuality* is focused specifically on giving students room to express their truest selves, or "the freedom to recognize their capabilities and individual potentials" (Radovic-Markovic and Markovic 2012:98). This focus is specifically suburban because only districts that do not have to worry about average achievement numbers and are well-resourced enough to provide a variety of art, music, sports, and other extracurriculars can afford to focus on things like *uniqueness* (e.g., Puerto 2018). For example, Palisades School District's mission statement said, "all students deserve the opportunity to develop individual talents and abilities," and New Hope's stated: "all people's unique abilities and needs should be respected, recognized, and supported." Both of these mission statements expressed that the role of the school district was to support students as they develop and express their individuality. The case study data helps

contextualize these mission statements a bit more, demonstrating how official statements like this played out within the actual schools. As one teacher at Carver explained, "we really value giving everybody an opportunity to figure out what it is they want from the world and make that a thing." She made it clear that in addition to the district's efforts toward creating a meritocracy, they were also focused on helping students develop and cultivate their unique selves. This tends not to be found in urban schools, where there are both fewer resources and a greater focus on using conformity to increase test scores (e.g., Golann 2015). This focus on both *individualism* and on cultivating *individuality* was a common thread across the districts and thus exists as one of the institutional myths guiding suburban schools.

Changing world/global society.

Forty districts included a responsibility to prepare students for a "changing world" or "global society" within their mission or vision statements. This "changing world" was reflected within suburbs and their school districts—demographics were changing around and within them. However, this institutional myth is future focused—in addition to preparing students academically, 40 districts explicitly stated that students needed to be prepared for a more "global" society or "changing" world or to become "global citizens." This language has traditionally been used in conjunction with or to stand in for multicultural education or a focus on cultural differences across communities and countries.[5] While some parents and community members might be against the idea of schools attempting to teach anything beyond "reading, writing, and arithmetic," on the whole, school districts operated with the charge that they were

[5] Use of the term "global society" in education became popular in the 1980s–1990s when schools began to focus on multicultural education (Popkewitz 1980). Multiculturalism was a movement in education that "arises from a concern that schools prepare young people for constructive public participation as citizens in a diverse society" (Sleeter 2014:85). Research on multicultural education from the 1980s–1990s demonstrates how these terms are interchangeable (e.g., Lynch 1989).

supposed to be preparing students for something *beyond* simply excelling in academic pursuits (in college, for example). They were supposed to be teaching students how to co-exist with people different from them, and how to—capitalistically, to be sure—be productive and effective at *working* with people across different boundaries.

Diversity.

The final common value that came up in district policy documents as well as in the case studies was diversity, sometimes in conjunction with inclusion. To start, many districts indicated a concern for inclusion by referencing "all" students repeatedly. For example, Souderton's Vision Statement said, "we believe that all people can learn," a claim that was repeated in similar fashion in several other vision statements and/or shared values/mission statements. Another common invocation of inclusion was simply a reference to teaching or serving "all" students, implying a silent opposite situation in which the school was only dedicated to teaching or serving *some* students, or some specific *group* of students. In addition to these nods to inclusivity, 41 districts out of 60 mentioned the word "diverse" or "diversity" somewhere in their mission statements, vision statements, or shared values. Given this, it is clear that the *term "*diversity" is significant to the institution of suburban schooling. However, diversity is an infamously vague word, especially so when it is invoked as a *value.* As Ellen Berrey (2015:2) explains, "when political and organizational leaders speak of diversity, they could mean the many ways that people differ from each other. …however, they are often referring to racial minorities or specifically to Black people." Diversity came up in many different ways in these data.

Overall, I find that diversity was mentioned in approximately four different ways throughout both the larger sample's policy documents and my case studies. First, districts mentioned diversity as a *fact*, simply referring to, as Berrey (2015) says, "ways that people differ

from each other" (2). For example, one district described their student body by saying, "Building upon the historical and culturally diverse roots of our community." Second, districts mentioned diversity as a *strength*, describing ways that diversity was a net-positive aspect of the community by saying things like, "our diversity makes us stronger." Third, districts mentioned diversity as *celebration*, upping the ante of the idea of diversity as strength by asserting that *not only* was diversity something positive, it was something to celebrate. For example, one district said, "diversity is something positive to showcase," another's shared values included "encouraging and embracing individuality and diversity," and another included "appreciate our diversity" in a list of things to teach students to do. Finally, districts discussed diversity as *capital*, something that could and should be leveraged to increase student success. One district said, "diversity is a strength and an asset."

It is clear that placing value on diversity and inclusion was one of the important institutional myths guiding suburban school districts' decision-making. The variation in how districts defined the terms demonstrates the range this amorphous idea encompasses. This in turn hints at what I will discuss more thoroughly in the next chapter: The predominant racial ideology at suburban schools is *not* one of colorblindness but one of diversity.

Community.

Finally, districts focused on community. The focus on safety, community, climate, and environment was sometimes implicit, but often explicit in the comprehensive plans, with over half of the districts mentioning community. The idea of "community" was invoked in two different ways—first, some districts noted that they were "community focused," and in that case they meant they worked to involve the external community surrounding the school. For example, Southeast Delco School District's shared values included the following: "We believe the

community is the first classroom," and the William Penn School District's core values included, "students, parents, and community working in partnership promote lifelong learning." Second, districts noted that it was part of their job to *create* a community within the school. As public schools are neighborhood and community institutions, it makes sense that districts would be expected to involve and support the families who send their children to the schools. For example, Twin Valley School District's Shared values included: "we believe in creating a welcoming, supportive environment."

Within the case studies, this latter way of mentioning community was an important idea that came up in many interviews with administrators as well as teachers. While respondents did not typically say things like "I work to create a safe and nurturing environment" (i.e., parroting mission statements), they did express that their schools and districts had a cohesive sense of community—and that this was both an important and positive aspect of their organization. For example, one Jefferson teacher told me "it's like we're one big family" when discussing her school. Another mentioned,

> I guess they [district and building administrators] definitely like the community aspect, like having a community and being a community. That's why like, we have the SOAR t-shirt that we wear, and they do the next activities [homeroom bonding / team building exercises]. And so I think they want to build that community feel. A sense of community is a really big thing to our district.

One high school vice principal at Carver explained to me that the school had a "culture of caring, every student needs to be supported…every student deserves to be safe." These quotes demonstrate that working to create a school/district community or "community feel" was an important professional responsibility for districts, beyond simply putting it on their policy documents.

Suburban School Districts' Institutional Myths Inform Professional Responsibility to Address

Inequality

Suburban districts demonstrated commitments to similar goals, or institutional myths, which were: character (with variation but a focus on individualism and individuality), achievement and excellence, community, global society, and diversity. What, though, do these shared institutional myths tell us about the way districts interpret inequality (research question three)? I argue that together, this group of shared values explains a professional responsibility toward both reducing and educating about inequality that exists at the institutional level. While these myths are separate ideas, together, they consist of an institutional commitment to reducing and educating about inequality. This institutional commitment was, as I explained in the introduction, mirrored in the one-on-one interactions I had with interview participants. However, this collection of institutional myths demonstrates that the professional responsibility interview participants talked about was a broader, institutional phenomenon.

I argue here that given the institutional myths that appeared in these documents, it follows that school districts considered fixing inequality part of their professional responsibility. Institutional theory would suggest that professional responsibilities would be at least in part determined by the institutional myths governing the institutional environment the organization is operating within (Meyer and Rowan 1977). Following institutional theorists who describe the relationship between institutional myths and organizational decision-making (e.g., Hallett and Hawbaker 2020; Guhin 2020), I argue that insofar as school district administrators (who are often the ones setting the tone and agenda for the schools within the district) have agency within the structure provided by institutional requirements, they will determine their professional responsibilities by extrapolating from the institutional myths guiding their decision-making. In this case, I argue *specifically* that the myths around achievement, individualism, and diversity

create a professional responsibility to fix stratified and unequal outcomes by demographic categories. In addition, I argue that the combination of focus on "global society" or a changing world, which often is an idea interchangeable with at least one aspect of multicultural education (Popkewitz 1980; Sleeter 2014; Lynch 1989), with the focus on diversity creates another professional responsibility—educating students about inequality, in order for them to go on to lead successful lives in this "changing world." Again, these findings are reflected in interview data.

Reducing Inequality

How do achievement, character, and diversity add up to equal this professional commitment to fixing stratified academic outcomes among students? First, stratified outcomes and inequality within schools are oppositional to a concern for diversity and inclusion. An institution committed to diversity and inclusion could not condone academic outcomes stratified by race or SES. Additionally, the focus these districts had on achievement and excellence played a role in constructing this professional responsibility. When academics, policymakers, and activists talk about the "achievement gap" or, more recently, the "opportunity gap," they are usually referring to a gap between students in city schools—largely lower income, students of color—and students in suburban schools—largely white, affluent students (Diamond and Posey Maddox 2020). As I discussed in the introduction, this dichotomy between cities and suburbs is no longer true. As such, even if *on average* suburban districts were still scoring just fine on standardized tests, the district leaders were much more concerned about achievement gaps and opportunity gaps *between* students within their district. On average, the 60 districts in my study scored a 79/100 on the PA School Performance Profile, with a median of 81.5/100. This measure is made up of indicators of average academic achievement (40 points), indicators of academic

growth (40 points), indicators of closing the achievement gap (10 points), and "other" academic indicators including graduation rate, promotion rate, attendance rate, AP/IB participation, and PSAT participation (10 points; PA State Board of Education).

While some comprehensive plans simply discussed improving overall student achievement (11 in total), many (43) explicitly referred to achievement gaps as an issue. To give an example, one comprehensive plan stated, in the section on four-year improvement goals, that they were, "committed to closing the achievement gap." Another district was more descriptive, saying they, "seek to eliminate gaps in opportunity, access, and outcomes that are highly predictable by students' race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and location, while simultaneously improving outcomes for each and every student." While these vary in level of detail, both demonstrate that despite strong *average* student achievement scores, achievement gaps were seen as a problem to be solved. This commitment to closing the achievement gap makes sense because "percent of gap closure" is one aspect of Pennsylvania school districts' state evaluation.

However, the fact that achievement gaps played such a prominent role in comprehensive plans, despite making up a mere 10% of the PA School Performance Profile, indicates that districts might be focused on achievement for more reasons than simply meeting policy goals. This is notable in a few areas. First, while policy documents from the districts did refer to achievement, specifically, especially in their plans for improvement or their notes on what they had done well (see above), many districts (33) that mentioned achievement as a *value* also used another word—excellence. This makes it clear that these districts' dedication to achievement went beyond their desire to receive high School Performance Scores. Despite high scores, they were still not living up to their committed values, or their institutional myths, so long as that excellence was stratified along race and SES lines. Many scholars argue that institutional myths

like these are decoupled from actual organizational life (e.g., Ray 2019), so it is a possibility that districts could simply ignore this dissonance. Whether or not this institutional myth is tightly coupled to everyday organizational life, it is clear that districts' broader mandates include an obligation to work to fix inequality within academic outcomes.

Thus, when there were clear disparities in achievement by race and by SES, suburban schools were not living up to one of their strongest institutional myths. In addition to conflicting with their institutional commitment to excellence, stratified academic outcomes conflicted with institutional commitments to diversity and to community—if students of color and low income students (and their families) cannot reasonably expect to have the same opportunity to achieve excellence as their peers, then there must be some mechanism, something occurring at school, that makes this the case. Given this, stratified outcomes are inherently oppositional to these districts' institutional commitments to achievement, community, and diversity and inclusion. Given findings in previous literature about the relationship between institutional myths, organizations, and the individuals within those organizations, it follows that this institutional myth would lead to *at least* a superficial commitment (i.e., Meyer and Rowan's 1977 "myth and ceremony") to boosting academic performance from students of color and working class students so that student achievement numbers would no longer be stratified along these demographic lines.

This finding triangulates well with data from interviews. For example, one administrator at Glory explained the situation this way: "we absolutely have an achievement gap here like most public schools in America, I think we've done a good job trying to close it, but it's not closed." Every one of the administrators that I interviewed explained to me exactly how unfair the system has traditionally been for students of color and low-income students. Administrators were neither

unaware of this inequality nor willfully ignoring it; instead, they expressed concern (whether performed or genuine) for these unequal outcomes and expressed that it was part of their job—their professional responsibility—to help rectify this situation.

On the other hand, districts' commitment to individualism could potentially conflict with their commitments to achievement, community, and diversity and inclusion. Commitments to individualism can sometimes unfold in a libertarian manner, with organizations believing that a true meritocracy already exists and that stratified outcomes along race or socioeconomic lines must have something to do with culture (Small et al. 2010) or innate ability. To explain, it follows that school districts might look at unequal outcomes in their students and say "well, our students are achieving their own 'personal best'" and simply ignore that the outcomes are stratified along racial and socioeconomic demographic lines. This has played out in schooling contexts, with individualism, for example, serving as a common pretext for maintaining historically unequal systems like tracking (Handsman et al. 2022).

However, the districts in this sample did not fall back on this libertarian logic, as is clear from both comprehensive planning documents that noted achievement gaps as a problem as well as interview data. To bring back the quote from the comprehensive plan I shared above, one district explained that part of their mandate was to, "seek to eliminate gaps in opportunity, access, and outcomes that are highly predictable by students' race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and location, while simultaneously improving outcomes for each and every student." Note that this goal could solely focus on eliminating stratification in academic outcomes, *or* it could ignore that stratification entirely and only focus on "improving outcomes for each and every student." Instead, this district invoked multiple institutional myths—excellence, diversity (valuing), and individualism—all at once. Potential conflicts between institutional myths are

difficult to interpret from documents alone, but this finding is supported by interview data. When interview participants described their goals, every administrator I interviewed explained that they were attempting to create a level playing field for students because the current opportunity structure was *not* level. While the commitment to individualism was strong among these districts—as shown by the many districts that listed values related to the idea and by the commonality of schooling structures focused on individual achievement, like tracking—this version of individualism was one in which meritocracy was the goal. Their vision of their ideal district was one of pure meritocracy, leading to outcomes that would reflect each individual student reaching their true potential, regardless of race or socioeconomic status.

Educating about Inequality

In addition to districts' concerns with their own *internal* inequalities—that is, stratified academic outcomes—their institutional myths also demonstrated a professional commitment to educating students about larger, structural inequalities that existed outside (and were reflected inside) the school walls. Commitments to preparing kids for a "global society" and a "changing world" might seem like empty platitudes. However, they refer to a concern on the part of 40 out of 60 school districts that children need to be prepared to succeed in a world that might look different from the insular (or even not so insular) suburban worlds in which they were growing up. As I have discussed earlier in this chapter, preparing students for "global society" is parlance that became common in schooling documents during the 1980s and 1990s' focus on multicultural education. Multicultural education was a movement that began in the 1960s but really took off in the late 1980s. One expert stated that the goal of the movement was to, "restructure schools so that all students will acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to function in an ethnically and racially diverse nation and world" (Banks 1993:27). Banks

(1993) explained that the movement attempts to accomplish this goal through diversifying content, constructing knowledge, equity pedagogy, and prejudice reduction. It is clear from this literature that multicultural education, and these districts' invocation of global society, involves a dedication to teaching about inequality.

In addition to these mentions of a "changing world," districts also invoked diversity in these sections of their values statements 41 times. The connection was not an accident—schools saw it as their responsibility to prepare students to interact with people who look, speak, worship, love, and live differently from them. This sort of value goes to show that school districts were not solely concerned with what happened during the 13 years students are in school; they were also concerned about some kind of amorphous future success, and they believed that teaching students how to effectively move through a diverse world was part of the essential preparation for that eventuality. However, how do you teach students to respect difference and communicate with people different from them without also teaching them about inequality? Even districts that have tried their best to be politically neutral have found themselves up against complaints from parents concerned about their children learning about inequality at all. I will explore this conflict further in the fourth and sixth chapters.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

While perhaps it could be taken for granted that school districts work to address inequality as part of their professional responsibility, I felt that it was important to back up this claim with evidence and provide some hypotheses as to why this is the case. While it might seem obvious—teachers care about their students and do not want them to fail—it was important to show that the institutional myth extends beyond the policy incentive (i.e., School Performance Profile scores), which is fairly minimal. Suburban districts' commitments to student achievement

and excellence—both in terms of standardized, quantifiable data and as a more amorphous, individualized value; individualism—students having the space to explore their talents and passions and discover what it is they truly want to make of themselves in this world; diversity; community; and preparing students for a changing or global world helped create or at least explain their professional responsibility to reduce and educate about inequality. Together, these institutional myths paint a picture of the various commitments suburban school districts waded through as they determined their priorities for their organizations. Additionally, these myths explain something else—why school districts even bother to care about inequality at all. As I argue in the previous section, the combination of their concern for excellence with their concern for diversity and community creates a situation in which working to fix inequality becomes a professional responsibility for these school districts—not something they can shove off on either racist and essentialist claims about the capabilities of different *sorts* of students OR something they can blame on families or culture, but instead something that they, as schools, are supposed to fix.

In the end, school districts' DEI efforts and more recent commitments to antiracism—which I will describe in the third and fifth chapters—make much more sense when considering them in the context of these broader institutional myths that guide their decision-making. Ultimately, the institutional myths I discuss here make up the first tenet of the DEI Doctrine: that suburban schools feel a professional responsibility to both work to fix inequality and to educate students about broader social inequalities. It is because of this professional responsibility that DEI initiatives play a significant role in suburban school districts. In the next chapter, I will turn to the second tenet of the DEI Doctrine, which is concerned with the makeup of these DEI initiatives.

Chapter 3: Diversity-Centered DEI Initiatives

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In the previous chapter, I identified several proclaimed values or institutional myths guiding school district decision-making. I then argued how together, these values demonstrate, justify, and explain why suburban school district personnel view ameliorating inequality as part of their professional responsibilities. In this next chapter, I build on this finding by exploring how this professional responsibility manifested in equity initiatives, or diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. In this chapter, I address this overall phenomenon as it unfolded in the months *before* COVID-19 and the uprisings against racism following the police murder of George Floyd. In the fourth chapter, I will discuss how these twin crises impacted DEI initiatives in these schools. Specifically, in this chapter, I ask:

1. How did administrators and teachers in suburban school districts conceptualize equity and DEI?
2. How did these conceptions shape and constrain the policy initiatives these institutions devise and implement?
3. Were these subsequent initiatives tightly coupled, loosely coupled, or completely decoupled from day-to-day life in schools?

I answer these questions with data from the three case study districts: Carver, Jefferson, and Glory. I look at these questions in the context of two sorts of DEI initiatives: policies geared toward making academic outcomes more equal and policies or initiatives that seek to diversify curricular content. While the former is focused completely on fixing inequality *within* the district, diversifying the curricular content is both about reducing inequality within the district and educating about broader inequalities in society.

Using these two examples, I advance knowledge in two ways. First, I demonstrate how district personnel took up their professional responsibility to address inequality. While in the last chapter, I established that the districts' institutional myths created a professional responsibility to reduce and educate about inequality, how district personnel interpreted that inequality—and therefore how they devised solutions, or equity initiatives—is an open question. I find that all three case study districts implemented DEI initiatives that were designed to promote representational diversity. The question of DEI initiatives is not one that can be explored solely through the lens of institutional theory. It is equally important to look at this phenomenon through the lens of theories on race and racism. I argue that the way they interpreted inequality had to do with their dominant racial ideology—diversity ideology—which resulted in DEI work focused on diversity alone.

I argue that this meaning making is directly influenced by racial ideology, or "the racially based frameworks used by actors to explain and justify (dominant race) or challenge (subordinate race or races) the racial status quo" (Bonilla-Silva 2010:33). I bridge my discussion of institutional theory with a discussion of dominant racial ideologies (Mayorga-Gallo 2019; Smith and Mayorga-Gallo 2017). Other scholars have examined conceptions of equity in schools, noting that these conceptions fall along a political spectrum and have subsequent political consequences (Guitton and Oakes 1995; Allbright et al. 2018), noting that the way leaders define equity changes due to political circumstance (Turner and Spain 2016), or arguing that it is possible for districts to prioritize equity when the equitable choice is *also* the most pedagogically appropriate choice (Handsman et al, 2022). These past analyses of conceptions of equity among school district leaders have generally not taken theories of race and racism into account. Two notable exceptions are Tyler, Frankenberg, and Ayscue (2016) and Turner (2020),

who argue that teachers have a colorblind view of race when thinking about diversity in schools. I find that suburban school district workers no longer operate under a color-evasive racial ideology and are instead operating under a diversity racial ideology. In this work, I use theories of racial ideologies as the basis for theorizing and understanding district personnel's conceptions of equity. Although equity is concerned with inequalities beyond racism, race still takes center stage in discussions of inequality in the United States, which was surely the case in my field sites. Given this, it makes sense that racial ideologies would play a role in determining how individuals and groups understand equity work.

While in the past, the dominant racial ideology (among white groups, at least) was one of colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva 2010), scholars have argued that this dominant thinking has shifted toward a racial ideology focused on *diversity* (Mayorga-Gallo 2019). Mayorga-Gallo explores this claim by analyzing interviews with white millennials, arguing that the diversity ideology has four components: a focus on acceptance or tolerance; centering white people's good intentions; commodification of otherness; and a concern for how increasing diversity could be a liability for white people. She subsequently argues that these components together create an "amorphous diversity" as a response to racial inequality or racism (Mayorga-Gallo 2019). I take this typology as a starting point when looking at my specific data about suburban schools, and I find that diversity ideology plays out differently in this environment. I find that district personnel do focus on acceptance but also celebration and the potential strengths of representational diversity. Second, I find that rather than centering their own good intentions, they center the professional responsibility they have as a district to reduce and educate about inequality. Third, Mayorga-Gallo (2019:1799) explains commodification in the following way: "to exhibit one's compliance with diversity ideology and with 'fairness,' one needs to display diversity for others to see. To

achieve this end, people of color are used as symbols by whites." In the context of these school districts, this tenet unfolds differently. Rather than the objectification that she describes, district personnel are concerned with proportionality in their academic outcomes, which would cement their success as a district. Finally, Mayorga-Gallo (2019:1801) describes *liability,* in which, "diversity is seen as a threat to other white American values." District personnel did not discuss diversity as a threat, but they did express concern for how white parents would perceive their DEI efforts. The most relevant tenets to this chapter are the middle two—the professional responsibility and concern with proportionality. However, the first tenet still comes up here, and I will discuss both this and the fourth tenet in more detail in the next chapter. I argue that the dominant racial ideology found in suburban schools was *still* diversity ideology because, after all, they were still focused on diversity. However, I hypothesize that the differences I find among district personnel in this particular institutional and organizational environment have to do with districts' charge to reduce inequality. I subsequently hypothesize that this institutional commitment to reducing inequality might act as an intervening variable that changes the specific contours of dominant racial ideologies.

Additionally, I demonstrate that these DEI initiatives were *not* decoupled from school life. Institutional myths are a key aspect of institutional theory—these myths, as I explore in the previous chapter, can overlap (or couple) tightly, loosely, or not at all with on-the-ground organizational practices (Hallett and Hawbaker 2020). Scholars have argued that proclaimed commitments to fixing inequality tend to be meaningless because they are often a disingenuous performance of the values organizations are required to adhere to, at least on the surface (Ray 2019). This is known in the institutional theory literature as *decoupling* between institutional myths and actual, on-the-ground organizational practices. The level of coupling between the

districts' institutional commitment to reducing inequality and their actual on-the-ground practices has important implications for the nature of their DEI work. If the institutional myth was decoupled from, or does not overlap with, organizational life, that demonstrates that DEI initiatives were not being implemented with fidelity. On the other hand, if the institutional myth *was* tightly coupled or highly overlapped with organizational life, that demonstrates that DEI initiatives *were* being implemented with fidelity.

Scholars have made quite a range of claims about coupling. Early institutional theory argues that institutional myths are most often decoupled from organizations (i.e., schools) and that this decoupling results in "ceremonious" rituals and practices that give the outward appearance of adherence to institutional myths without changing much that is occurring within school walls. Later, scholars argue that accountability policies like No Child Left Behind have actually caused schools to become more tightly coupled with their governing institutional myths because of the lack of flexibility in these policies. Most recently, though, Victor Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations goes back to the original thought, though his argument is not specifically about schools. He argues that a key element of racialized organizations is the decoupling between commitments to antiracism and actual practices within organizations. Given that this is currently the dominant understanding of how DEI initiatives function—how they are conceived of and also why they are ineffective—it is important to evaluate data through this lens. I find that suburban districts' commitment to DEI work was not, in fact, decoupled from the school environment. In other words, I do not find that these commitments were disingenuous or simply surface-level. This is not an evaluative finding: Just because a policy is implemented with fidelity does not mean it is a high-quality policy. However, the tighter coupling between commitments to reducing inequality and DEI work in these school districts demonstrates that any

critiques of this DEI work should be rooted in the *content* of these initiatives, not in the way they were implemented. In addition to demonstrating how institutional myths mediate the dominant racial ideology, I demonstrate how institutional myths might also mediate certain qualities that racialized organizations tend to share (like decoupling).

DATA AND METHODS

In this chapter, I establish my claims by analyzing data from the three case study districts. Specifically, I rely on the 64 interviews I conducted between Fall 2019 and Summer 2020, as well as policy document analysis from the three case study districts. While I do include the 18 interviews I conducted after COVID and the 15 I conducted in the immediate aftermath of George Floyd's murder and the subsequent racial justice uprisings, school districts had yet to really respond on the organizational level at this point (at least to the calls for increased antiracist work).

FINDINGS

Diversity Ideology and Resulting Conceptions of Inequality and Equity (Equity as Access)

In the previous chapter, I established that school districts viewed fixing inequality as part of their professional responsibilities. However, this professional responsibility could unfold in several ways: It could have been completely decoupled from what was actually happening in the organization, or it could have been an active part of organizational life. Additionally, if this professional responsibility *was* an active part of organizational life, the professional responsibility alone does not explain the choices they made in regards to how they went about trying to do this work. DEI initiatives are proffered solutions that are based on how the people in charge understand the problem they are trying to solve. In this case, it is important to better understand how school district leaders and teachers make sense of the inequality they are trying

to fix. Only then will we have a solid understanding of the meaning behind the DEI initiatives they put in place. Despite analyzing a very different context, Rachel Sherman (2017) makes a similar point. In her book, *Uneasy Street: The Anxieties of Affluence,* she uses interview data to better understand how affluent people conceptualize their own position amidst the inequality in society. Her work exemplifies the meaning-making process that unfolds as individuals make sense of life in an unequal society. Affluent individuals exist in a specific niche of society but so do school personnel because schools are expected to mitigate the inequality in society. As such, this chapter is really about the process of *meaning making* around inequality that goes on at all levels of the organization of the school district.

So, to start, how did suburban school personnel understand inequality? I find that they understood inequality as a lack of representational diversity in a number of different domains of the schools. This is the case for both "kinds" of inequality—the inequality within the school (i.e., stratified outcomes) and the inequality they felt responsible to address outside the school walls (and of course reflected back within the school walls). In other words, they were concerned with *proportionality*—the opposite of the disproportionality evident in their stratified student data—and the disproportionality evident in their curricula that centered white histories, perspectives, and ways of experiencing the world. This focus on fixing inequality through proportionality echoes Mayorga-Gallo's (2019) *commodification* tenet, but rather than an objectification, district leaders were focused on how to make academic outcomes neatly reflect their demographics. For example, one administrator from Jefferson explained inequality in this way:

> So we find that low income students, minority students, their scores in general are not comparable to that of their white counterparts, or their more affluent counterparts. When we look at that more closely at a high school level, that really plays out along course lines in terms of tracking and what courses they're sitting in. A clear example of inequity in our system is our gifted population. We can take Google Maps… And when I take [where] the gifted student population [lives] and put them as pins on a map, I see them

> above our north/south line in our district, which is essentially where our economic disparities are.

This response was particularly descriptive, but its message was not uncommon: Inequality means stratification in academic outcomes, resulting in a lack of racial and socioeconomic representation in advanced courses. While this administrator was aware of the effects of residential segregation on these outcomes, as an educator she focused on aspects of inequality that she and her district could try to control. Every one of the administrators that I interviewed explained to me exactly how unfair the system has traditionally been for students of color and low-income students, resulting in disproportionate numbers of white and affluent students in advanced courses. Administrators all expressed a desire for this unequal representation in advanced courses to be rectified, in addition to expressing a desire to implement other supplementary academic policies for equity. This conviction reflects Mayorga-Gallo's (2019) *intent* tenet; however, instead of centering their own good intentions as individuals, district personnel focused on the fact that ameliorating this inequality was one of their professional responsibilities.

One administrator from Jefferson illustrated this by explaining the questions she asked herself when making policy decisions for equity: "What barriers do we have set up that maybe we need to take another look at? And so those discussions are definitely happening. What is being modified and what they're doing about that?" When discussing curricular content, administrators and teachers were less concerned with "barriers" that needed to be removed and more concerned with their capacity to create and teach curriculum that reflected the full population of the school districts' students. This was proposed both as a goal for helping students of color and low-income students achieve and as a means of preparing students for the "global society" that they would eventually need to compete in.

Thus, when school district personnel made meaning of inequality, they found that inequality meant a lack of representational diversity in a number of different schooling domains. The ascription of this meaning to inequality directly impacts the way they then planned for *equity*—since one is the proposed solution for the other. In the rest of this chapter, I theorize the end product of this meaning-making process as a conception of equity as *access.* Administrators explained that creating equity in their schools would happen through a process of providing *access* to the school structures that were currently allowing white and affluent students to be successful in school. This problem of *access* has been described in the scholarly literature as well. For example, Lewis and Diamond (2015) describe the processes that keep students of color from gaining access to advanced courses in one diverse suburban high school, while Karolyn Tyson (2011:6) describes the lack of access as a "school-based pattern of separation" and argues that this "racialized tracking" has detrimental effects on the way Black students understand their relationship to academic achievement. Specifically, in the case of academic achievement, district leaders in my study were concerned with rectifying this exact problem by providing access to advanced courses so that the racial and socioeconomic makeup of these courses would not be so white and affluent. In the case of curricular content, they were concerned with providing access to content that reflected students' identities—something white students had always had access to. Additionally, beyond their "access" goals in terms of fixing the inequality within school walls, they were also concerned with providing *all* students "access" to texts that would prepare them to succeed in a "diverse world." This conception of equity as access directly reflects how they understood the inequality in their districts—an understanding that was primarily focused on representational diversity.

In the end, this resulted in equity initiatives that were focused on *creating*

representational diversity in these various domains. In other words, administrators believed that creating equity in academic achievement, to start, meant leveling the playing field for students, but ultimately leaving the *game itself* untouched. The administrators knew that schools as they had traditionally been structured were not meritocratic, and they understood how systems like tracking, in addition to individual bias, disadvantaged students of color and low-income students. In this way, their conceptualization of equity as access promoted a meritocratic logic in which the goal of equity-oriented policymaking was to create the conditions for true meritocracy by providing access to extant resources in the schools. Diversifying curricular content was meant to celebrate district diversity (echoing Mayorga-Gallo's *acceptance* tenet), level the playing field for students of color,[6] and prepare students to succeed in a "global society." This understanding of inequality and subsequent understanding of equity played out in a number of different areas of school—it did not start and end with concerns about academic achievement and curricular content, but also had to do with disproportionality in discipline (i.e., students of color receiving harsher punishments more frequently), hiring practices, professional development topics, and communications with families and communities. However, for the purposes of this chapter, I will focus mainly on the question of academic achievement and curricular content.

In addition to "equity as access," I found one other conception of equity in my data—"equity as individualization." As might be expected due to the differences in their organizational roles and capacities, teachers thought about creating equity at the individual student level, rather than in terms of broader policy changes. They conceptualized equity as an effort to individualize

[6] The idea of diversifying curricular content likely originates in the literature on Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP). However, CRP goes beyond simply switching out curricular texts—Ladson-Billings (1995:476), who coined the term, explains: "not only must teachers encourage academic success and cultural competence, they must help students to recognize, understand, and critique current social inequities."

the educational experience—an effort to provide each individual student with the tailored resources they might need in order to be successful. Teachers believed that equity meant meeting each student where they individually were, and then providing what they needed to succeed. The teachers in my study also did not believe that a true meritocracy existed, but they saw themselves like doctors in an operating room: They could not change the fact that the patient had arrived to them in their current condition, and they believed they had to provide whatever kind of care that patient needed in order to get better. One teacher explained this logic by recounting a time she grew frustrated with her class:

> I said, you know my job is to treat you all equitably and that does not mean equally. And they were like 'that's not fair!!' and I was like 'no, no, because every one of you has something different that you need in order to be successful and some of you have legal documents telling me what that is. And I can't just ignore that legal document just to make everybody feel the same,' I said, 'and that's not really what we're trying to do here. So whatever you individually need to be successful, that's what I'm trying to give you.' So that's my view of what equity is.

Here, this teacher, in trying to define equity for herself and for her students, articulated that equity meant giving each individual student what they needed, rather than providing the same support to all students.

Whereas administrators sought solutions to this problem that would create equal access to honors courses, teachers were more concerned with this problem on a student level, which makes sense given their professional roles. This conception of equity—as a process of individualizing the learning experience—has the potential to be more expansive than the conception of equity as access because it is not inherently limited by the current structures of the school. The focus on "access" and "individualization" are both a reflection of diversity ideology, mediated by district workers' commitments to the institutional myths I outlined in the previous chapter. If district leaders were operating under a colorblind racial ideology, they would not see stratified student

outcomes as a problem to be solved *by the school.* Instead, school district leaders might blame students' cultures at home for the stratified academic outcomes. In my data they were race conscious, even before 2020, expressing a clear understanding that it was not the fault of the students or their families, but rather a failure on the part of the school to meet their professional responsibility to their increasingly diverse student body that had led to the stratification, or disproportionality, of their academic outcomes. All in all, district personnel expressed ideas about inequality that reflected a dominant racial ideology focused on *diversity.* However, the tenets of this ideology were different among a population charged with a professional responsibility to reduce inequality than they were among a random sample of white millennials (Mayorga-Gallo 2019).

Conceptions of Equity as Access and Resulting Policies and Initiatives

In this section, I will discuss policies dedicated to reducing inequality in academic achievement to demonstrate how this racial ideology translated into DEI initiatives focused on representational diversity. Most of these policies were focused on reducing the racial and socioeconomic stratification between students in honors/advanced placement courses and students on the lower tracks. Institutional theory would predict that there would be at least some similarities—or, isomorphism—across school districts despite their demographic differences. For example, Greany (2020) analyzes data from school peer reviews and finds that schools in England are isomorphic in how they use these reviews, and Ford and Andersson (2019) analyze 25 years of data on Milwaukee's private school voucher program and also find isomorphism between the schools in their study. The case study districts align with these previous findings: Administrators across the three school districts touted similar policy reforms. Rather than putting forth the idea of getting rid of all tracked courses or policy approaches that would require an

overhaul of the current hierarchical school structure, administrators often used the "level playing field" metaphor to explain the purpose behind several similar policy changes each district had recently (in the last five years) espoused. However, several other connected policies and initiatives arose as well—these generally had to do with diversifying curricular content to improve Black and Latinx students' achievement levels, changing homework or deadline requirements, or having generous rules regarding when and how students were allowed to retake tests. The conception of equity administrators constructed in interviews—equity as access—was enshrined in district policy through these sorts of initiatives. However, as noted above, this understanding of equity has serious limitations as the focus remains on making extant structures fair rather than creating new structures entirely.

As Table 6 illustrates, the three districts institutionalized several equity-oriented policies. These included: removing prerequisite courses for taking advanced placement (AP) or honors-level courses, removing a required teacher or guidance counselor recommendation in order to take AP or honors-level courses, relaxing or removing consequences for incomplete homework, relaxing or removing consequences for missing deadlines, generous "second chance" learning policies for students who fail, and reducing the number of course levels (tracks) at the high school level. These exact policies are broken up by district in Table 6. These policies fell into two different categories: some were *subtractive* (focused on removing barriers) while others were *additive (*focused on adding supports for students and teachers). Subtractive policies were more common, and tended to be passive, not requiring resources or support on the administrative end. Additive policies tended to be more specific and targeted, and required more work from administrators.

Table 6: Policies to Reduce Stratification in Academic Achievement by School District

Case	Subtractive Policies	Additive Policies
Carver School District	-Teacher recommendation is not required for honors/AP -No prerequisites for humanities courses -Flexible homework deadlines -Removing the bottom track	-Multiple entry points for advanced math -Diverse curricular content
Glory School District	-Teacher recommendation is not required for honors/AP -No prerequisites for humanities courses -Removing the bottom track	-Send letter home re: advanced math to all families -Multiple entry points for advanced math -Diverse curricular content
Jefferson School District	-Teacher recommendation is not required for honors/AP -Fewer prerequisites for certain courses -Removing several math tracks	-Second chance learning -Diverse curricular content

Additive Policies

All three school districts implemented *additive* policies, which focused on adding additional structures or supports for students (and teachers). Each district had at least one recognizable additive policy in place: at Carver, additional access pathways into accelerated math; at Glory, both additional pathways and letters home to *all* parents about accelerated math, and at Jefferson, a robust "second chance" learning policy that allowed students to retake tests they had failed. These equity policies were tightly coupled with organizational life as they fundamentally changed the structure of course work at each district. Additionally, all three districts discussed diversifying curricular content. They felt this was important for several reasons, one of which was student achievement.

At Carver, as in many school districts, the math course pathway was subject to great debate. There was a tension between what many parents wanted for their kids—accelerated math

extremely early on (early elementary school)—and what was best for both math pedagogy and equity (delaying tracking as long as possible; Handsman et al. 2022). At Carver, the administrator in charge of the math course pathway had tried to appease both parties by keeping math acceleration starting in 4th grade but adding in access points in 5th through 8th grade for students who chose or qualified for acceleration later on. These students would still be able to access the advanced math courses in high school even though they were not tracked up at the first juncture. One administrator explained the complex logic, as he showed me the relevant flowchart:

> So the one thing that that I believe in is multiple opportunities for accelerated math, right, because the lightbulb turns on for different kids at different times... So that's the first path [accelerating in fourth grade], then when you come into fifth grade, you have a second opportunity so you have these students here. So then you can accelerate in, and then you skip sixth grade math, and you join the students here that were already accelerated… Then again, we have the next opportunity. If you're staying on grade level here, you're in sixth grade math at the end of sixth grade, you can then go into algebra one. This is the only test in one year, so you have to do a self study of pre algebra over a summer... Like there is a path for you. You're still gonna have an opportunity for calculus.

This kind of policy is additive because rather than just focusing on removing a barrier like teacher recommendations in place of data-driven decision-making, it actually adds points of access for students at several junctures along the K–12 math continuum.

Similarly, at Glory, administrators described the math course pathway as a series of "chutes and ladders" that allowed students to move both up and down the levels at various points of their school careers. As part of this ladder structure, the administration at the middle school level had started a program in which they sent letters home about the accelerated math program to all parents making it clear that they could opt their children into this program. The high school principal explained, "It's also going to the Multicultural Parents Association, and our historically underrepresented parents of our historically underrepresented kids to say, Hey, there are honors

classes out there, there are AP, you know, communication." This added an explicit point of access for students and their families, rather than just quietly taking away a teacher recommendation requirement but then requiring the parent to complain in order to change their child's level. These policies represent somewhat of a deviation from what other scholars have found at similar schools. For example, Lewis and Diamond (2015) describe how informal processes, like parent complaints or implicit bias, like low expectations for Black students, result in racialized tracking. However, in these case studies, the districts' additive policies demonstrate that district leaders understood that these are processes that need to be interrupted to create more diverse representation in advanced courses, and they were at least an attempt to try to correct for these issues.

Additionally, at Glory, there were a few additive structures in place—though they were not strictly policies, as such. First, an administrator explained that they frequently discussed changes to course sequencing when trying to create more access to honors courses:

> Sometimes you have to take a look at what's going on with the core sequencing. With regards to maybe, you know, … we need to put another bridge in place to help them move from this course to this course to eventually get to the AP courses.

Rather than just allowing all students to take honors or AP courses and leaving it at that, this demonstrated an attempt to help students become ready to be successful in those courses. The Glory superintendent also hinted at additive structures in place, explaining that, "we've really worked hard on eliminating barriers and providing more encouragement and supports for kids, including additional academic support classes built in kids can take if they need extra help, if they desired, higher level courses."

While Jefferson did not have additive policies in place to reform their math course pathway, they had instituted a robust Second Chance learning policy for students who struggled

on certain tests, which added in a support for students. One administrator explained this policy here:

> [we create access by] offering things like tutoring services after school and offering things like Second Chance learning. Yeah, for kids who have to have that job. You know, they have that job. They had to work that night, there was no choice. They didn't study well enough. Okay. You might not you might have had to work on Tuesday, but maybe you don't work on Thursday. I'm going to let you retake that test. And I'm going to not average the grades but I'm going to give you the grade that you earned. I've just revamped the whole second chance learning policy for the district with that in mind, because at least they have a fighting chance. At least more students have a fighting chance of doing well.

Rather than simply *taking away* a barrier, here the Jefferson administrator described a structure she added into the student's experience—both the after-school tutoring and the opportunity to retake tests if they struggled the first time. Policies of this kind support students who have greater familial responsibilities and perform caregiving or other work to support their family—schools with students with majority higher SES might not institute such a policy.

In addition to these various policies dedicated to building in multiple "access points" to higher levels of student achievement, these districts all—to various degrees, of course—discussed initiatives to diversify school curricular content. The head of humanities at Carver explained to me that they had changed their model for the lower-leveled courses, saying,

> We said, okay, you have to meet as a department to figure out how you want to spend your $10,000. And basically get, you know, maybe if there are three teachers at that grade level, and you each want five copies of the book, then you buy 15. And so, yes, we had a truckload of books delivered this summer. And then kids are reading more than they were, because they're not forced to read *Romeo and Juliet* for two months. They get one thing that they do as a class and then the rest is by interest, by teacher encouragement, by talking to their peers, they're really kind of developing their palate for what they like to read.

This initiative, focused on encouraging reading, no matter the book, was an attempt to improve academic achievement among the lower tracks. Thus, this was not focused explicitly on moving students up a track, but rather on pulling up the bottom track itself so that all students were achieving at relatively high levels. This is a notable difference from what previous scholars have

found regarding curricular content in lower tracks. For example, in Jeannie Oakes' (1985) seminal text, *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality,* she finds that pedagogical quality and rigor is significantly lower in lower-tracked classes. Here, on the other hand, Carver's English Language Arts (ELA) department was dedicated to improving the educational experience for students, and this dedication was demonstrated through the money they spent on this initiative, as well as through the potential impact of the initiative itself.

While this happened most notably in ELA and History or Social Studies, it was also an aspect of conversation around math and science courses. For example, one middle school math teacher at Carver explained to me that diversity in curriculum often came up. She said:

> I feel like when diversity and stuff like that comes up with math it's more like… are your real world examples… are the topics… can be related [to] by all the students. So just the different situations we're using or even down to the names or things like that. Just, can every student kind of relate to it.

Here, she noted that it was important for curricular content to have representational diversity—and implied that students *relating* to the real-world examples they used in class was important for student achievement.

Subtractive Policies

It is not a surprise that there were significantly more *subtractive* policies in these districts—policies meant to create access by removing structural barriers—as these policies did not require the same level of resources or restructuring. Some of these structural barriers included: prerequisite courses, teacher recommendations, multiple "lower" tracks, and firm homework requirements or deadlines. These subtractive policies tended to be passive in nature, removing a barrier without actively doing anything to recruit students into advanced courses *or* providing material support to the teachers who then had to handle their implementation.

While there was some variation in these policies across districts, all three had

implemented policies that either removed or changed prerequisite course requirements and teacher recommendations for honors- or AP-level courses. One administrator from Jefferson explained this general mindset by saying: "and it's part of stopping the process, you know, of 'Oh, we need to weed out the kids who don't belong in honors' to saying 'wait a minute, we need to encourage as many kids as we can.'" In order to combat this biased mindset, representatives of each district explained to me that they had gotten rid of (Carver, Glory) or lessened (Jefferson) prerequisite courses and teacher recommendation, and therefore many or all AP and honors courses were available to any students that wished to enroll in them. While these district leaders did not cite or discuss Lewis and Diamond (2015) or Tyson (2011), they relayed an understanding of the processes that lead to a lack of representational diversity in advanced courses that was similar to the sophisticated ideas in these academic texts. These additive and subtractive policies, then, represented their efforts to move past or improve upon the issues noted in this previous literature.

Administrators touted these policies in the name of leveling the playing field for students. However, even though a teacher recommendation might not be *required* to take honors or AP at Carver, for example, a teacher recommendation was still *provided.* One district leader at Carver explained,

> If you take out kind of the human gatekeepers, then you have a much more open system. Interviewer: So how is it decided if there are no human gatekeepers [i.e. teacher recommendations]? Respondent: So there is basically a soft teacher recommendation just to inform the student and the parents. But that they can override that and enroll in whatever course they want.

So while *technically* they had removed the barrier—the required teacher recommendation—they were still relying on students to advocate for their own place within the extant unequal system. However, this phenomenon was still very much aligned with their construction of equity, which

focused on providing the *opportunity* for access, not necessarily supporting individuals in gaining this access or remaking the structures to remove the need for access entirely.

Additionally, even though administrators talked about "no prereqs," there were large exceptions for math, language, and sometimes science. For example, one administrator at Carver explained:

> Now, there are some natural limits. For example, you can't take French five without taking the previous levels. You can't take Calc BC without having completed the previous courses. But for AP English or AP history, AP psych, anyone who wants to take the course and they're willing to put in the work, then anybody can take them.

So even though administrators referred to this "no prerequisite, no teacher recommendation" policy as a creator of equity through access, this was really only effectively true for humanities and some elective courses. An administrator at Glory also explained this change in policy this way:

> So for example, when I first started out, we had, we had descriptors of the courses that were very strict in terms of, in order to do this course you had to do the following. You had to have a certain grade, you have a certain teacher recommendation. So it was it was restricted for some students, instead of just saying, hey, if you really want to challenge yourself, you can take this course. Here's some things you might need to have in your in your back pocket to be successful in the course the plan, and we had to craft that instead it became less restrictive for students, and more students had the opportunity to get into courses that they wanted to get into.

While they still provide recommended course pathways, they had removed some of the barriers keeping students out of honors classes.

This hyperbole was also evident in the course selection guides for students. While the district or school policies might have been that all students were allowed to enroll in advanced courses, all three districts still had both prerequisites and teacher recommendations listed on their student curriculum guides, which are the documents students use to find information about the course selection process. Carver's handbook explained, "Carver has leveled courses in English,

Social Studies, Mathematics, Science, and Foreign Language. Students can take courses listed as Honors/Advanced Placement (H/AP), College Preparatory (CP), or Academic (no designation)." Nonetheless, all humanities honors or AP courses offered after 9th grade listed 9th grade honors with a B or higher and a teacher recommendation as prerequisite requirements. Glory and Jefferson both took this one step further in their curriculum guides. Glory's stated:

> If you disagree with your teacher's recommendation you won't be able to change it without doing two things: talking to the teacher about why the recommendation was made, and talking to your counselor about a request for a course level change.

In order for students to change their assigned level, they had to advocate for themselves with both the teacher and their counselor. Jefferson's stated:

> The purpose of honors courses is to provide a more rigorous and demanding academic challenge for **recommended** [emphasis theirs] students. Success in honors courses is largely determined by motivation, attitude, and previous academic preparation. Initial entry into an honors course is defined by specific criteria developed by school leaders….Students who are changing academic levels will be required to get a teacher recommendation. Teacher recommendations will be based on performance, test scores and other objective data. If the parent chooses to override the teacher recommendation, a form is completed, signed by parent and returned to the guidance counselor.

In order for students to change their assigned level at Jefferson, their parent had to override the recommendation through the student's guidance counselor. Jefferson's rule also used loaded terms like "motivation" and "attitude" which might dissuade students or their parents from contesting the teacher's recommendation. These excerpts make it clear that even if the official school policy was that any student was allowed to enroll in any advanced course, this was a lengthy process that involved parental support as well as significant initiative on the part of a student who would have to go up against their teacher's beliefs about their ability.

These excerpts are notable for a few reasons. First, they demonstrate that despite interview respondents' assurance that teacher recommendations were a thing of the past, the actual rules were more stringent than they implied. Second, rules that require students to self-

advocate in this way can be restrictive. Jessica Calarco (2014) argues that socioeconomic status (SES) plays a role in how comfortable students are asking for help in the classroom, an argument that extends to this circumstance. If lower SES students are not as comfortable advocating for themselves by asking for help, it follows that they might *also* not be as comfortable contesting a teacher recommendation. Additionally, Karolyn Tyson (2011) illustrates how Black students in diverse schools were reluctant to take advanced courses because of a learned fear of failure. In this case, it would be important for teachers to encourage Black students to try a challenging course, rather than relying on students to have confidence in their academic abilities without support. These arguments from the literature paint a picture of how subtractive policies like this—even if implemented with fidelity—might have unintended consequences.

Several other subtractive policies came up as well, though less consistently across all three districts. Both Carver School District and Glory School district described a major policy change that involved getting rid of the bottom track in high school courses. At Carver, this policy change came up frequently when I asked about equity in course taking. Administrators touted it as a move toward increased access for equity purposes. For example, one administrator explained:

> over 10 years ago, our building principal put into place the idea of detracking. And that was huge in terms of looking at equity. So, it took a while, it was a process he did with the help of the other administrators and the teachers of taking three levels back down to two. So we have more opportunities for students to engage in the honors courses, and then AP, than we've ever had.

Each administrator made this connection between moving from three to two tracks and more "opportunities" for students to take advanced courses. At Glory, when asked about academic equity-related policy changes, the superintendent explained:

> So the first thing we did is we eliminated the so-called bottom level track. So that we try to kind of raise the bar in terms of you're either going to be in our academic level, or our

Honors/AP level, but nothing below that.

By getting rid of the third, lowest track, both districts raised the academic bar for all students, constituting what previous research would call a democratic liberal approach (Guitton and Oakes 1995; Albright et al. 2018). Less centrally, Carver School District also had subtractive policies around getting rid of hard deadlines for homework—a policy meant to remove deadlines as a barrier to academic success by allowing students with greater familial or work obligations additional time to complete homework assignments.

At Jefferson, administrators reported a similar policy move to limit the number of tracks. One administrator explained how they had ended math acceleration programs that started in 2nd and 3rd grade:

> So over the years, a lot of people have fought hard to limit the number of tracks. So even though some effort has been made there, there's still work to do… At the end of second grade, they would take a math test, and based on this math test, they will get put into accelerated math. And what accelerated math was, was skipping third grade math and just go into fourth grade.

In this way, the barrier to honors and AP math had previously occurred at 2nd grade, so removing it pushed that specific moment of tracking into middle school. One administrator explained how this then played out at the middle school level, saying,

> we're actually trying, we're working to break down some of those barriers. An example would be, we currently offer 14 math courses at our middle school. We're looking to collapse a lot of those and go for 8. So we're on the path. So that's one thing we're doing to kind of remediate that.

While math was still deeply tracked at the middle school level, they were effectively removing around half of the levels, both raising the bar of the lowest-tracked course and limiting how far students could advance in math before starting high school. In this case, subtractive policies focused on removing excess tracks. These policies conceptualized excess tracks as barriers to quality education for students. In the case of Glory and Carver, the policies were meant to raise

the bar for all courses by eliminating the bottom track, thereby increasing rigor for students who would have been in that lower track. At Jefferson, these efforts focused on math specifically. While Glory and Carver's math tracking policies were additive in nature—focused on adding in "chutes and ladders" for students to access advanced content—Jefferson attacked the same problem by reducing the number of tracks.

Conceptions of Equity as Access—Equity and Inequality in a "Global World"

Efforts to fix inequality through representational diversity went beyond fixing inequalities in academic achievement. They were also part of that *other* professional responsibility around inequality—to educate students about inequality so they could be successful in a changing, diverse, or global society. In response to questions about how they thought about curricular content—and especially how they thought about equity and inequality when making curricular decisions—both administrators and teachers at all three districts explained that they were working toward making their curriculum more representative of the school community and of the world at large. In this context, there *was* some variation by demographic district—the racially and socioeconomically diverse district (Carver) had invested substantially more time, money, and effort into diversifying the curriculum, on the premise that they were not serving their diverse community by reading books by and about solely white authors and characters. The other two districts in my study, which were both majority white, still identified this as a problem and saw fixing this problem as a major goal. Even though their student body populations were both over 70% white, both districts were slowly but steadily becoming more racially diverse. This diversification was often part of the explanation for wanting to build a more representative curriculum, and they were additionally concerned with ensuring their students were prepared to enter and compete in a global world. Thus, although

Carver had put *more* energy towards these efforts, they still existed in various forms across all three districts.

Interviewees mentioned diversifying curricula as an answer to questions about curriculum and equity. For example, one history teacher explained how he wove inequality-related topics into his history lectures:

> So for instance, today I was talking about the 18th century pretty broadly. And I mentioned that it was also the time of colonization. And this is the time period when Britain and France are fighting over the world, outside of Europe. This is the time when Britain showed up in Australia. And that was sort of a door for me to talk even for one second about the Aborigines. And about, even for one minute, so they even like so I've said, there's an indigenous culture to Australia, it's not white people. So I sort of like when I teach Columbus, we do it through the lens of like, Columbus was a pretty terrible person. And so a lot of what I've tried to infuse is sort of the counter narrative.

This demonstrates that they viewed curricular diversification as the appropriate goal for them to aspire to in terms of addressing inequalities both within and beyond the school walls. The purpose here was not to improve academic achievement but was simply because he believed it was important for students to learn about the diversity of the world and its history.

Oftentimes, respondents described this curricular diversification process as an opportunity or responsibility to provide students with "mirrors and windows."[7] By this, they meant that students should read books and learn histories that both reflect their own identities AND provide "windows" into the way other people are living. While the "reflection" or "mirrors" aspect of this project was implicitly geared toward students of color—who for years had *not* had those kinds of mirrors in school curricula, the "windows" were mainly, though not unilaterally, for white and affluent students.[8] They had to, of course, make an argument for or

[7] This idea originates from Emily Style's 1988 essay *Listening for All Voices* where she describes how curriculum can serve as window and as mirror.
[8] Of course, texts about the Jewish experience, for example, could be a window for Black or Latinx students, and texts about the Latinx experience could be windows for Black students, and so on and so forth.

justify why a diversifying curriculum might benefit white students as well. This—in particular, the windows—was an important aspect of districts' attempts to prepare students for a global world. They had a commitment to this sort of preparation, and they used this as a justification and explanation for why diversifying texts was important, even when white parents complained.

Interviewees at all three districts discussed a desire to make the curriculum more racially diverse. While these efforts were certainly farther along at Carver, Jefferson and Glory both were making inroads in this area in different ways. The clearest example of this had to do with the ELA curricula at the three districts—all three were trying to adjust their reading lists in order to include more books by authors of color that also featured characters of color. When teachers and administrators recounted to me the reasoning for these efforts, this was often an exercise in demonstrating to me their process of realizing the bias in the curriculum. For example, one administrator at Jefferson explained:

> So rather than constantly thinking about, like, you know, the typical traditional readings that we would have done, can we look at something in which, you know, the main character is a Latino boy, or an African American girl, you know, what, where can we look? Can we look at, you know, pieces that address disabilities? Can we look at pieces that address some of those topics, because it does expose the kids to the opportunity to engage in discussion, some of those discussions that are super hard to have, you know, it does allow for that.

They described this at the high school and middle school levels, to be sure, but teachers at the elementary level were concerned that younger students were only being exposed to picture books about white characters. Teachers and administrators at all three districts described this process as one that was incomplete, but important to acknowledge. They framed the lack of diversity in reading material—the lack of representation—as a problem that both created and reflected external inequalities, and teachers were generally pleased across the board that this had been addressed in the school. They framed representation as the problem and diversification of ELA

texts and history curriculum as the solution.

For many years, Black education scholars have discussed diversifying school curricula as one important aspect of Culturally Relevant (or Responsive) Pedagogy (CRP), starting with Gloria Ladson-Billings' seminal 1995 article establishing the idea. These districts' commitment to diversifying the curriculum almost certainly originated from these important theoretical ideas, as they disseminated through teacher preparation and administrator certification programs. However, scholars have found that while some of the basic ideas from CRP are present in these programs, the ideas are often watered down, presented as a set of checklists without requiring participants to engage in the full meaning of CRP (Allen et al. 2015). One important aspect of CRP is helping students develop critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings 1995). This could potentially explain how the *idea* of diversifying texts became synonymous with equity work in suburban districts, despite the fact that diversifying texts without imbuing lessons with critical consciousness or critiques of social inequalities goes against the very nature of CRP (Allen et al. 2017; Ladson-Billings 1995, 2004, 2014).

While the districts all had varying levels of initiatives meant to diversify curriculum ongoing before the events of 2020, these efforts were not always part of the "official" curriculum of main courses like ELA and history. They were at times, but at other times and in other ways, these efforts to diversify the content students were exposed to at school existed outside the mainstream curricular structure. These were more common at Carver, the district furthest along in the diversifying effort. One example from the previous section is relevant here as well; rather than changing the required reading texts in all courses, one main aspect of Carver's diversification project was to offer a multitude of options and build in an element of choice to the ELA curriculum. In this way, Carver was able to provide the option of "mirrors" and the option

of "windows" without forcing white students to read about anything they were uncomfortable with.

Along similar lines, Carver instituted a one-book program in 2018–2019, where students chose one of three books that were all related to a common theme. The first year, this theme was actually police violence—however, while the administration described this program as their own DEI initiative, it actually arose out of a group of librarians/ELA teachers who wanted to get lots of kids access to one particular book—*The Hate U Give.* However, district leaders decided to broaden it so that students would have a choice—and, of course, since this was not strictly part of coursework, parents could opt their kids out of participating. Here, again, we see an example of a district focusing on creating representational diversity in curricular content as a DEI initiative—this time, for the purpose of preparing students for the "changing world." Districts argued that diversifying curriculum was important both in order to improve achievement of students of color and low-SES students and in order to prepare *all* students for life in a global society. However, this kind of equity initiative is just as limited by *mentioning* or *acknowledging* inequality as an important thing to study, but then qualifying it with the "both sides" conversation about the inequality of police brutality from the perspective of both Black people experiencing the inequality and the police perpetuating the inequality. This is a prime example of how diversity ideology, mediated through district leaders' professional commitment to working to fix inequality, allows for some acknowledgment of structural issues but ultimately prevents a more thorough examination of these issues in school.

The "access"-oriented policies for academic achievement by and large worked to reify extant unequal structures (like tracking), while prioritizing proportionality in academic outcomes to fairly reflect the districts' diversity. This also follows Melamed's (2011) argument about

antiracist projects focused on representation. On the other hand, these access policies that prioritized showcasing both sides of an issue or allowing white students to opt out, were limited by their concern about *liability.* The districts were not demonstrating a colorblind ideology—they were comfortable mentioning and discussing race. However, these discussions were constrained by concern for the comfort of white students and their parents. I will go into more depth about the content of such initiatives, the contours of the districts' concern, and the conflicts between their dedication to DEI and their concern for political neutrality in following chapter.

Questions of Coupling (and Why This Matters)

As I foreshadowed in the introduction and literature review of this chapter, I am also concerned here about the level of overlap, or tightness of coupling, between the districts' institutional commitments to reducing and educating about inequality and their actual, on-the-ground organizational life. Hallett and Hawbaker (2020) argue that the institutional field consists of: institutions, organizations, and interactions between individuals. Here, I am looking primarily at the level of coupling or overlap between the institutional myths around reducing inequality (institution level) and the implementation of DEI initiatives within the schools (organizational level).

These three entities have various *coupling configurations* depending on the circumstance. For example, something can exist at the institutional level (here, an institutional myth compelling a professional commitment to fixing inequality), but this institutional level can be completely *decoupled* from what is actually happening in both day-to-day operations within organizations (here, schools) and/or interactions (here, between school leaders and teachers). On the other hand, these three entities can also be tightly coupled, or highly overlapped. As previewed in the introduction, organizations scholars have argued that school districts, along with other

organizations, use buzzwords like equity and diversity solely to maintain their legitimacy—in other words, that their invocations of these values are *decoupled* from actual practices on the ground (Ray 2019; Ahmed 2012; Berrey 2015; Bell and Hartman 2007). As Berrey (2015) demonstrates, administrators in higher education use the concept of diversity as a kind of "symbolic politics" without making any real changes. Research on diversity narratives in suburban schools as well as understandings of school diversity overall suggest that this kind of "symbolic politics" might extend to the K–12 levels as well (Petts 2020; Tyler 2016; Tyler et al. 2016). This line of thinking rings true to older institutional theory as well: In their seminal article, Meyer and Rowan (1977) famously argue that schools, and specifically classrooms, are loosely coupled from their institutional environments.

However, more recent thinking in institutional theory has reversed course, arguing that schools are *not* completely decoupled or even loosely coupled from their environments. Coburn (2004) demonstrates that teachers contend with institutional logics and myths by sifting these through their extant beliefs and practices, a finding confirmed and furthered by Spillane (2006). Rowan and Meyer (2006) posit that newer accountability policies force tighter coupling in the education sphere. Hallett (2010) furthered this position with empirical evidence from one school faced with implementing accountability policy—the policy was tightly coupled with the school which resulted in what he called "turmoil." Given these various perspectives in the literature, and most notably the contention between Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations, which predicts that institutional commitments to equity would be decoupled from practices within the schools, and the more recent education scholarship suggesting that schools are experiencing *tighter coupling* than ever, I hope to use my cases as a means to adjudicate these various perspectives, at least in the case of suburban schools. It is important to consider this perspective

here not only because of the open theoretical question, but also because this question of coupling has significant consequences for practitioners attempting to help schools craft meaningful DEI initiatives. If it is true that schools have a stated commitment to DEI, but that these initiatives are not actually being put in place on the ground, that indicates a problem with *implementation.* If, however, it is true that these commitments to DEI are actually tightly coupled both with equity policies and with what is actually happening in schools, this indicates a different problem—a problem with the *meaning* attributed to DEI itself, rather than a problem with policy implementation.

I find that district workers' commitments to DEI are *not* in fact decoupled from policy or from goings-on in the day-to-day at schools. In turn, I will discuss additive, subtractive, and "choice-based" access policies here. First, the additive, and some of the subtractive, policies that I discussed above were evidence of tight coupling between institutional commitments to DEI and actual on-the-ground practices in schools. These policies fundamentally changed the structure of course work at each district and, as such, were not evidence of a superficial commitment to DEI work. For example, at Carver, district administrators added various access points to advanced math so that students would not be stuck in the level they were sorted into as early as 4th grade. This policy fundamentaly altered the way the school sorted students into math classes—it was not a branding maneuver—an example of Meyer and Rowan's (1977) "myth and ceremony"—or something they could say but ignore. It was a change to the fundamental organization of the schools that affected each principal who sorted students, each teacher who built lesson plans from curricula, and each parent and student who made their way through school. This kind of restructuring was also evident in Glory's "chutes and ladders" math policy, which included a fundamental change to the math course pathway, along with funding and personnel distributed to

support new math courses and time and energy spent communicating options with parents—these were inarguably active parts of organizational life, not performative branding. While Jefferson did not have an additive equity policy in place for mathematics, they did have a "second chance learning" policy, which, again, fundamentally altered the way the district allocated resources (for tutoring) and calculated grades (i.e., allowing students to retake tests). Additionally, subtractive policies focused on removing some of the bottom tracks were *also* evidence of tight coupling between institutional commitments to DEI and on-the-ground organizational life. These policies, which existed across the academic board at Carver and Glory and in math at Jefferson, also fundamentally altered the structure of schooling, affecting administrators, teachers, and students alike.

Subtractive policies were not all this tightly coupled to day-to-day organizational life because as I mentioned above, they usually did not require many resources to put in place. The argument that they were *not* decoupled from school life could be a dubious one indeed—these sorts of policies would be relatively simple to completely decouple from organizations. However, my interviews with teachers provide evidence that these policies were not totally decoupled because teachers explained to me how they struggled with the ways the policies played out in their classrooms. Through analyzing teachers' descriptions of their experiences with these policies, it became clear that even the more loosely coupled equity policies played a role in organizational life—they were not simply a branding maneuver.

Many teachers struggled with these access-oriented policies. For example, teachers struggled to implement the "no prerequisites and no recommendations" policies. One math teacher at Glory suggested that there were not enough supports in place to help students new to advanced courses succeed:

> I mean, there was a point a few years ago where I said, you know, they got rid of the prerequisites. And, you know, I think that was one of the leading factors behind it. It was like we wanted all kids an opportunity to succeed in the school. But even then I said, you need to help these kids like, you know, you have to mentor them. There has to be somebody there to kind of help these kids get through.

This quote demonstrates that even with the policies in place at Glory, there were still not adequate resources in place to support students in making the transition from lower- to higher-tracked courses. Importantly, it *also* demonstrates that despite the issues with subtractive policies that I discussed above, students *were* using these policies to take advanced courses that they had not taken the prerequisite courses for. Additionally, an English teacher explained that there was not enough training for teachers new to supporting heterogeneous groupings of students in advanced courses—training that is often limited to lower-level course teachers:

> And, you know, when we talk about differentiating courses, I see at my school, people still really think of that as something that needs to be done in academic level [lower level] courses. And if our students are going to take honors classes, well, then they just need to be able to, like, that's what makes you an honors student, as opposed to like really looking at the student and going well, you know, they have this deficit or that deficit, that capability wise, potential wise, we need to push some of these kids into honors and honors classes need to be just as differentiated to meet the needs of different learners as an academic class.

In essence, the policy gave all students the ability to enroll in honors or AP courses, but it did not necessarily provide the supports teachers needed to help students succeed in these more rigorous courses. Another teacher at Glory explained to me that she had a difficult time with students who took her AP Biology course without taking prerequisites. She noted that she had to differentiate the content for students and that they struggled because she was not prepared to teach the course in this way. These data demonstrate two important phenomena. First, these data offer evidence that even subtractive DEI policies *were* being implemented in these districts and were not, then, decoupled from everyday organizational life, despite the hyperbole in interviews with administrators. Second, these data demonstrate that even though these DEI policies were

implemented with fidelity, teachers were bearing the burden of the changes without enough support from administrators. This, in turn, calls into question whether *decoupling* or, rather, the question of whether organizations or individuals are being *performative* or genuine in their DEI work, is the most significant problem to worry about when looking at equity initiatives.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I demonstrate how suburban school districts' commitments to fixing inequality interacted with their dominant racial ideology of diversity to result in DEI initiatives focused on increasing representational diversity. I explore how districts' professional commitment to fixing inequality plays out both in terms of inequality in academic outcomes and broader inequalities existing both outside and within schools. I argue that the institutional lens I presented in the preceding chapter is necessary but not sufficient for understanding this commitment to fixing inequality. As such, I bring in theories of race and racism, arguing that the equity or DEI initiatives districts put in place are a combined result of their institutional myths (as explored in the previous chapter) and their racial ideology. In addition, I attend to the more common argument about how DEI initiatives function—decoupling—and argue that this process is not actually at play in the districts in my study.

In the literature, there is thorough discussion of (at least) two main contemporary racial ideologies—colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva 2010) and diversity (Mayorga-Gallo 2019). I find that, in contrast to Tyler (2016) and Turner (2020), it is the latter ideology at play in the suburban school districts, but I argue that the ideology is *mediated by* the institutional myths. In other words, whereas diversity ideology might hold certain tenets (Mayorga-Gallo 2019) in broader society, in schools, I argue, the professional responsibility workers feel to fixing inequality changes the dimensions of this ideology, even while the focus is *still* just as pinpointed on

diversity. I find that DEI initiatives are unilaterally focused on representational diversity—demonstrating that suburban school workers were guided by a diversity-focused racial ideology. While teachers and administrators might have had slight differences in how they conceptualized equity, with teachers focused on individualization and administrators focused on access, ultimately it was the administrators that created the DEI initiatives.

Mayorga-Gallo (2019) argues that diversity ideology consists of acceptance, intent (focus on white people's good intentions), commodity, and liability. I find that suburban school personnel had a slightly different diversity ideology, focused on acceptance, celebration, and strength; their professional responsibility to reduce inequality; concern for proportionality; and liability (but with white students and families). These specific aspects of suburban school workers' diversity ideology unfold in various ways in schools. This calls attention to the importance of researching the contours of racial ideologies in various environments. While previously scholars have argued that *place* can shape racial ideology (Douds 2021), here I argue that institutions and institutional myths can mediate the dominant racial ideology. Here, specifically, the institutional myths governing suburban schools act as an intervening variable, changing the way workers' racial ideologies play out within their organizational context.

Additionally, I address the idea that these sorts of DEI initiatives fail or are ineffective because they are *decoupled* from everyday life at school—or, in other words, that these initiatives do not work because of an implementation failure. While my data does not really allow me to comment on the "success" or "failure" of the initiatives I describe, I *can* demonstrate that these initiatives are not in fact decoupled from everyday life at school. Additive policies, especially, were in fact tightly coupled with organizational life—they often required a fundamental restructuring of the school schedule, school funding/budgets, and school workers.

Subtractive policies, for the most part, were not as tightly coupled—they did not necessitate the same level of financial or organizational changes. However, evidence from teachers tasked with handling the unintended consequences of these policies demonstrates that they were happening on the ground. This finding—that DEI initiatives were not decoupled from school life—is a theoretical contribution because it goes against what other scholars have found (e.g., Ray 2019). However, more importantly, it is a practical finding. If DEI initiatives are not working, my data demonstrates that it is not always a problem with *implementation*; rather, it can be a problem with *conceptualization.* By focusing solely on representational diversity rather than thinking more broadly about fixing structural inequalities, administrators limit the potential of DEI initiatives even when they are implemented with fidelity.

Approaches to equity work that prioritize making the current system more fair, rather than transforming the system, are inherently limited in both their political scope and efficacy. However, it is also important to note the ways my findings diverge from previous literature about suburban schools. For example, Lewis and Diamond (2015) illustrate how at the district they study, racialized tracking happens through informal processes like teacher recommendations and prerequisite courses. However, district personnel at all three districts in this study were well aware of those informal processes and were, through additive and subtractive policies, trying to move the needle. It is true that these policies were still limited in their scope, but this demonstrates that whether directly or indirectly, these findings from the literature have made their way into district leader consciousness and changed the way they think about the problems that need to be solved.

Chapter 4: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and Political Neutrality

"I think you're just kind of helped by just knowing the nightmare that's going to rain down on you if you reveal your politics. You'll be quiet when you know the hell that'll come down."

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Mrs. Dennings was grave as she explained Jefferson's commitment to political neutrality one October day in 2019, reflecting the level of seriousness with which the districts ensured their diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts were not perceived as political or partisan in any way. In this chapter, I describe the third tenet of the DEI Doctrine: that districts must maintain political neutrality and/or nonpartisanship even as they conduct DEI work. As I argued in the previous chapter, suburban districts' DEI initiatives were all conceptualized maintaining a focus on representational diversity. By focusing DEI efforts on providing *access* to extant school structures, school districts' DEI initiatives already avoided much of what could be seen as political or partisan. In a previous time, then, this third tenet of the DEI Doctrine might be redundant; the political neutrality or nonpartisanship might have been inherent in their focus on representational diversity. However, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, changing norms under Trump challenged extant understandings of "political" and "partisan," such that even efforts focused on representational diversity could be interpreted as partisan. The fact that suburban schools had to navigate this new conundrum is what makes this an important and timely piece of the DEI Doctrine.

As both sociologists and scholars of education have demonstrated time and time again, public schooling is an inherently political institution. While some scholars construct an idea of schools as an arena in which society works out moral quandaries (Labaree 2008, 2012) and other scholars argue that schools actively socialize students into predetermined roles in a society

(Bowles and Gintis 1976; Apple 1979, 1993)—just a few out of many relevant arguments—there is broad agreement in the literature that public schooling, as an institution, serves political ends in one way or another. At the same time, public schools are just that: *public* institutions that are designed to serve all students (really, all families) in a given geographical location, and these students come from families with diverse values, religions, and political leanings. This means that, like Mrs. Dennings cautioned above, schools tend to maintain at least a semblance of political neutrality. This commitment has been enshrined in law, as well, with the New York City courts ruling against teachers who wanted to wear political buttons at school, for example (Weingarten vs. Board of Education, 2008). The United States is ostensibly a pluralist society, and so U.S. public schools are not meant to be agents of the state, indoctrinating students into a sole political disposition. Over the years, schools have devised multiple strategies to aid them in walking this fine line (Binder 2002; Teeger 2015; Zimmerman 2005). However, as this chapter will demonstrate, the years preceding and following former president Trump's election changed what was culturally understood to be political or partisan.

While maintaining the institutional commitment to political neutrality, the schools in my study simultaneously contended with their professional obligation to both reduce and educate about inequality. In this chapter, I focus on that latter responsibility, as it is the teaching *about* inequality that uncomfortably chafes against the commitment to political neutrality. The case study districts worked to maintain two institutional commitments, which sometimes conflicted: a commitment to political neutrality and a commitment to educating about inequality. As the United States became increasingly politically polarized—the right moved much farther to the right than the left moved to the left—these conflicts became inevitable (Hacker and Pierson 2015; Grossman and Hopkins 2016). DEI efforts that might not have been deemed partisan ten

years ago began raising red flags for families on the right well before the current blow-up over "critical race theory." In this chapter, I explore this conundrum in a few different ways, answering the question: How did school districts navigate their dual commitments to political neutrality and DEI? First, I back up the claim that schools are guided by an institutional commitment to political neutrality. Next, I demonstrate how the three districts used the conception of inequality as one delineated by a lack of representational diversity in order to maintain political neutrality in their DEI efforts. Third, I describe how changing norms after Trump's election and presidency challenged this already precarious balance. Finally, I show how school districts responded to this challenge in a few ways: (1) by doubling down on their extant DEI efforts under the guise of maintaining their commitments to values like diversity, inclusion, and preparing students to succeed in a global society; (2) reinvigorating conversations about equity; and (3) ultimately limiting their DEI efforts in an attempt to avoid accusations of partisanship. Analytically, I approach these issues using the lens of institutional theory, inquiring into how schools navigate the conflict between two institutional myths.

Schools as Political Institutions

Many scholars over the years have illustrated the various ways that schools are political institutions. Perhaps most famously, at least in the sociology of education, Bowles and Gintis's 1976 book *Schooling in Capitalist America* delineates just how the institution of public schooling socializes students into their future role as "workers" in our capitalist society. They argue that the purpose of schooling is to create a willing workforce for the future. Michael Apple (1993), another Marxist sociologist of education, furthers Bowles and Gintis's argument by bringing in ideas about curriculum and school day content as well. He argues that schools, as purveyors of "official knowledge," are inherently political—the knowledge that schools transmit

is decided on through a political power struggle that conservatives have continuously won. He argues that even young children are socialized into political "worker" roles through rote learning tools like worksheets but that the trouble only intensifies as students get older and course content is presented in a way that only legitimates hegemonic political culture, socializing students into agreeing with the status quo. In addition, scholars have demonstrated the political nature of *debates* over schooling in the United States, from historical explanations (Peterson 1985; Zimmerman 2005) to more contemporary analyses (Binder 2002). Amy Binder (2002), for example, demonstrates how bitter debates over both creationist and Afrocentric curricula unfolded in several school districts. Both of these debates were political in nature, in that creationism was a cause championed by some individuals on the political right, and Afrocentric schools were championed by Black parents and community members who tended to fall closer to the political left. Dierkes (2012), Morning (2011), and Bromley (2016) also illustrate how curricular content can be a site for political contest and debate.

In addition, Apple (1993:67) notes more broadly that schools are arenas in which all different political, economic, and cultural groups come together to "define what the socially legitimate means and ends of a society are to be." David Labaree (2008:154) elaborates on this theme from a different perspective, noting that people "educationalize" social problems because schools are "an institution through which we can express our social goals." His argument demonstrates that even if schools themselves were not designed to socialize students into their identities as workers in a capitalist system, *people* would still use schools as an arena to work out ideological conflicts. In a different article, Labaree (1997) argues that schools have always served political goals, even though the specifics of those goals have changed over time from democratic equality to social efficiency and then to social mobility. Finally, the multitudes of

scholarship on the political *capacity* of schools demonstrates that no matter how school personnel might try to deny it, the project of schooling children is a political one (Katznelson 2005; Allen 2016; Hayward 2000). Danielle Allen (2016), for example, argues that one essential function of schools is to prepare students to play an active role in civic life. She calls this "participatory readiness" and emphasizes that deficiencies in this area are another way that schools perpetuate inequality.

Political Neutrality in Schools

Despite the general consensus in the literature that U.S. schools are inherently political institutions, they are also public-serving institutions that have to operate in a contentious and politically polarized environment. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, school district personnel believed it was important not to convey their political beliefs or to imbue any aspect of schooling with overt politics. This is a long-held norm in public schooling. While school districts recognize teachers' first amendment rights outside of the school context, courts have upheld the idea that teachers do *not* have the right to express political beliefs in school (e.g., Weingarten vs. Board of Education 2008). Some argue that public schools fall under the "captive-audience doctrine," which is a legal principle that "protects people in certain places and circumstances from unwanted speech" because they cannot leave (Garry 2009:1). It is a matter of legal debate whether public school students are *legally* captive audiences (Salkin 2015), but this ongoing debate has not stopped the idea from permeating discussions about religion, politics, and ethics of public schooling (Gidney 2019; Tuccille 2020). School district policies also reflect this. Carver's, for example, details that, "employees shall not engage in political activities during assigned work hours" and references Pennsylvania's 1949 Act 14 which details restrictions on public school employees. While the policy does have an exception for the "study of politics and

political issues when applicable to the curriculum and appropriate to classroom studies," it is clear that curricular content perceived as partisan or political would not be welcome, even if the policy is vague. Martha McCarthy (2008:1) sums it up well, explaining that "the tension between protecting students from political indoctrination and respecting public employees' expression rights will likely continue to generate litigation." Additionally, regardless of official policies, researchers have found that teachers operate under the assumption that part of their job is to maintain political neutrality. Dunn et al. (2019) find that teachers struggled to maintain nonpartisan after the 2016 election, but that they thought it was important that they succeed in this struggle. Pollock and Yoshisato (2022) also find that teachers in San Diego struggled to stay nonpartisan but remained committed to this goal. Thus, schools operate under the veneer of political neutrality—maintaining that while they may cover current events as well as past political events in social studies courses, they are ultimately nonpartisan, politically neutral institutions. As Chana Teeger (2015) describes in a different societal context, this kind of neutrality can have serious consequences for students' education and socialization. It is no easy task to maintain an image of neutrality given the political weight of everything from the simplest assigned worksheet to the larger schematics of the school day.

Other scholars have discussed related phenomena. Nina Eliasoph (1998), for example, uses the term "political avoidance" to discuss the efforts that nonprofit volunteers have to go through in order to remain disengaged from politics. She contends that people are not simply uneducated and uninterested but are actually dynamically invested in performing apathy in order to maintain their idea of successful democracy. Similarly, school administrators and teachers have to work to appear politically neutral, and they perform this neutrality to maintain their idea of nonpartisan, pluralistic schools, as is demonstrated in what Dunn et al. (2019) and Pollock and

Yoshisato (2022) found. This becomes difficult, though, as suburban schools are increasingly confronted with inequality. It is no longer the case that relatively affluent suburbs only serve wealthy, white families. Suburbs are becoming more and more racially and socioeconomically diverse (Diamond and Posey-Maddox 2020). Schools, then, are in a position where they need to conceptualize the inequality in their midst while still maintaining political neutrality.

Conceptual Framework

I analyze the paradoxical idea of political neutrality in schools through an institutional theory lens. In their seminal article, Meyer and Rowan (1977) argue that institutionalized rules become myths that organizations ceremoniously reaffirm in order to maintain their legitimacy in the environment. I build on this by taking up another aspect of Meyer and Rowan's work—what happens when institutional myths are in conflict? While they spend a great deal of time explaining how myths and ceremony can *resolve* conflict within organizations, they spend less time delineating what happens when the myths themselves conflict. They note that conflicts between myths can make organizations less efficient. They also note that pluralistic societies can lead to conflicting myths in the environment, and among their listed solutions to the problem of myths in conflict, the one that is most relevant here is the promise of reform. They explain that in the case of unresolvable conflicts between myths, organizations can promise a more perfect future—but that this delegitimizes the organization's current structure. In the end, they suggest that the only way to cope with conflicting myths is decoupling, paired with more "good faith" performances of the different myths. I argue that when faced with conflicting institutional myths, suburban school workers sometimes double down on *one* myth as cover for the other, and at other times, they shift the conception of the myth itself in order to make both fit. In this case, the way school workers understand their commitment to fixing inequality and, more importantly,

their commitment to *educating* about inequality shifts in order to stay compliant with the commitment to political neutrality.

Additionally, a district's focus on maintaining political neutrality is also related to their racial ideology. In the previous chapter, I discussed the dominant racial ideology at play in the districts. I argued that diversity ideology, as established by Mayorga-Gallo (2019) was prominent but altered due to the districts' institutional commitment to reducing and educating about inequality. One of the tenets of Mayorga-Gallo's diversity ideology is "liability." She describes "liability" as the fears white people have around the consequences of racial diversity. Here, I argue that school district personnel do have concerns about liability, but rather than concerns about general racial diversity, these concerns have to do with maintaining their status as politically neutral institutions. In addition, Jodi Melamed's (2011) work on official regimes of antiracism is useful here. She argues that the current official antiracism focuses on *representation* without making any real redistributive changes to unequal structures. In this chapter, I demonstrate the way this "official antiracism" plays out at suburban public schools—coalescing into a politically neutral understanding of inequality that constructs "lack of representation" as a problem and thus increased representation as a solution.

DATA AND METHODS

In this chapter, I rely on case study data to support my claims. Specifically, I rely on the 64 interviews I conducted between Fall 2019 and Summer 2020, as well as policy document analysis from the three case study districts. In the following chapters, I will explore how the claims I make here hold up amid times of crisis and will bring in the 15 interviews from 2021 as well as my fieldnotes from all of my participant observation.

FINDINGS

Nonpartisanship in Suburban Schools

As I discussed in the literature review above, the expectation of political neutrality and nonpartisanship is one that is commonly held in public schools in the United States. The cases in my study did not diverge from this norm; nonpartisanship continued to be an important institutional commitment. While this commitment was not outlined in comprehensive plans, it *was* enshrined in district policy, which prohibited teachers or any employees from political activity while at school. As I will demonstrate in this section, the commitment to nonpartisanship that existed both as official policy and unofficial norm was salient to the teachers and administrators in the districts that I studied. Regardless of the political demographics of the districts,[9] the districts strived to be nonpartisan and politically neutral. This was a commitment that predated Trump's campaign and election but became harder to maintain following those events. This political neutrality in public schooling was seen as important because school is compulsory for children and public schools by their very nature are designed to serve everyone, regardless of political beliefs. One administrator at Jefferson explained the logic behind the norm, saying,

> I am very much aware that, you know, we have compulsory school in this country, legally, that makes our students a captive audience.[10] So, under that contract you have to be very careful about everything you present because we are compelling them to be here, unlike a Catholic school or, you know, a private school where they're choosing it. Here you're forcing them. So that puts a heavy burden on us to be as unbiased as possible. So, I'm very careful to say like my personal political leanings, as far left as they may be, have no role here at school.

Here, this administrator summed up the position well: Because students were a "captive

[9] At Carver, between 60–70% of community members voted Democrat in 2016 and 2020; at Jefferson, between 40–50% of community members voted Democrat in 2016 and 2020; and at Glory, between 70–80% of community members voted Democrat in 2016 and 2020.
[10] This is debated in the legal literature (Salkin 2015).

audience," it was of utmost importance that teachers and administrators not use, or be perceived to be using, their position to indoctrinate or influence students. While it is debatable whether or not public school students *legally* count as captive audiences (see Salkin 2015), culturally this idea had pervaded the districts in my study. The administrator explained that this, of course, would be different at a parochial school, where parents would pay for a specific kind of religious or political socialization.

This norm arose in other interviews as well. One teacher at Carver casually mentioned this, saying, "I try never to share my personal politics in the classroom." Another teacher at Jefferson gave a detailed example of how this posed problems during the school day. She said,

> We're not really supposed to tell them our political views. So it is hard sometimes. Like we're getting ALICE[11] trained now. And we are training our students in ALICE… And so kids ask me if I believe that teachers should be armed. And I don't answer the question. Because it's very, that's a very political view. So I say, 'I'm not really going to tell you that, let's talk about it.'

Here, this teacher gave a specific example of a time that partisan politics arose with students outside of the curriculum and emphasized the norm that she not share her views. While arming teachers is a position that tends to be supported by conservatives, it is not an official party position. This demonstrates that even in cases where students were not asking about *literal* partisan policies, teachers were cautious in what they chose to share. This expectation was one that administrators shared as well. Carver's human resources director explained the following: "I think that in general, in a public school district, administrators are careful about expressing their own political views." This demonstrates that at various levels of the school district, employees maintained the norm that they were supposed to avoid partisan politics. This norm is reminiscent of Eliasoph's (1998) "political avoidance," which describes nonprofit workers' dynamic attempts

[11] ALICE is an active shooter response training; the acronym stands for alert, lockdown, inform, counter, evacuate.

to perform political apathy. Here, teachers and administrators adhered to a *norm* of political avoidance, though, even when the context they worked in was quite political in nature.

This norm created some challenging situations when it came to district-wide decision-making. One Jefferson administrator described the process of deciding whether or not the district should show the presidential inauguration, which was slightly contentious when Obama was inaugurated and then became much *more* contentious when Trump was inaugurated. She shared the following:

> So, my personal opinion was, we shouldn't show the Obama inauguration, because when the next guy gets inaugurated, we're going to have to show him too, so you don't even come close to picking a side here. Because that's going to have to go both ways… So then, you know, those questions came back around when Trump was inaugurated, 'well, you showed you show the Obama inauguration.' No, no, we actually we didn't. We said to social studies teacher, 'we trust you as professionals. Everyday you present unbiased political and social information. We trust that you'll do the same with this and only show it if you think it's relevant to your class, and it's for a reason.' So, there were a lot more people all of a sudden raising their heads asking about what we were doing. Some reminders did go out to staff around the election time just reminding staff what their role is. But I will say, you know, this is a huge organization, right? So, there could always be one person does something foolish. And we didn't have that. I feel like the teachers really understood that in their role they couldn't say they were sad the day after the election. So, like, that wasn't something that was going to be okay. And certainly, with social media, you know, a teacher says one thing, you know, that's going viral. Yeah, you have to be super-duper careful, to be as unbiased as possible. And I think you're just kind of helped by just knowing the nightmare that's going to rain down on you if you reveal your politics. You'll be quiet when you know the hell that'll come down.

Here, the administrator clearly explains the nature of public schools' commitment to being nonpartisan. She used the example of showing inaugurations to demonstrate that partisan politics can and should only be discussed in school when it is relevant to the curriculum—that is, in a social studies class where students are learning about the political process. The school did not show an inauguration or take part in any displays of partisan politics unless there was a clear connection to nonpartisan curricular material. She also alluded to the potential consequences for crossing this line—she described these consequences as both a "nightmare" and "the hell that'll

come down." This "hell" would likely come from parents, as while faculty and school board members at Jefferson were largely politically left of center, the parents in the community were more of a fifty-fifty political split, making partisan politics an extremely sensitive subject at school. It was clear that at all levels of the organization—from the very top administrator all the way down to micro-interactions happening between individual teachers and students—these schools were expected to be politically neutral and nonpartisan.

Nonpartisanship and School Districts' Commitment to Fixing Inequality

This commitment to maintaining nonpartisanship directly influenced school districts' construction of the problem of inequality. The case study districts as well as the broader sample all demonstrate a commitment to a professional responsibility to ameliorate inequality in their districts. This unfolded in two ways—working to reduce inequality *within school outcomes* and educating about broader inequalities in society. In the previous chapter, I examined how this professional responsibility translated to DEI initiatives that were centered around representational diversity. In this chapter, I examine this phenomenon from a slightly different angle, demonstrating how schools' DEI initiatives responded to an understanding of inequality that prioritized *nonpartisanship*. School districts were between a rock and a hard place: On the one hand, one set of institutional commitments required a professional commitment to fixing inequality, but on the other hand, another institutional commitment required nonpartisanship/ political neutrality. This was difficult because questions of inequality are deeply entwined with politics. Districts managed to thread the needle on this difficult topic by focusing on representational diversity. This, as I will briefly explore below, was, at least in part, an attempt to address inequality without wading into partisan politics. In other words, as schools remained protective of their commitment to reducing and educating about inequality, they were forced to

acknowledge the inequalities that exist both in their schools and in society. Not acknowledging inequality would not allow them to work to reduce or educate about inequality. However, instead of acknowledging the political reality of inequality, schools relied on a construction of inequality that focused on a lack of representation—this allowed them to simultaneously defend their stated values and remain nonpartisan.

Nonpartisan/Politically Neutral Understanding of Inequality Challenged by 2016 Election

Writing from the vantage point of 2022, it is almost difficult to remember the shock (both emotional and, at various levels, institutional) that came with Trump's campaign, election, and presidency. Analytically, I do not have the benefit of data collected in 2014–2015 to properly set up a before and after comparison here. However, it is clear that the long Trump era (i.e., campaign through his presidency) constituted a set of shocks to schools. When I conducted my first round of interviews—the 46 before the onset of COVID-19—everyone I talked to stressed the ways that the Trump era had affected the culture of their districts' schools. Suburban school districts were maintaining their position on the fine line between nonpartisanship and efforts to reduce inequality, but this was deeply challenged by several elements of the 2016 presidential election. Former President Trump's election in 2016—both his rhetoric during the campaign and after his win—resulted in a few main shifts in suburban schools' culture around discussing and challenging inequality. First, his inflammatory rhetoric explicitly made values like diversity and inclusion *partisan* in a way that they were not before. The norms around what "counted" as political became very different. Second, this rhetoric created a new tension for schools to navigate—what could they do when the president's ideals actually directly conflicted with institutional myths and values around respecting diversity, inclusion, and community? Third, this rhetoric and this new tension actually reinvigorated conversations about DEI in schools, leading

to programs and initiatives that were "covered" under the guise of the school's previously held nonpartisan norms and values, like diversity, inclusion, and preparing students for success in a global society. Finally, the reliance on this guise and insistence on maintaining political neutrality tempered these new DEI initiatives.

Shifting Norms around What "Counts" as Political

Teachers and administrators alike at all three districts expressed that the 2016 election was a sea change in both the *quantity* of conversations about politics/partisanship with students and the *intensity* of these conversations. In addition, teachers and administrators noted that the general culture of the schools changed following this election, making teachers more concerned about the curricular content they were teaching. Teachers explained that students often repeated what they heard at home, but that this created difficult scenarios for them during the school day. For example, when I asked one Jefferson teacher if he had seen a change in what students were comfortable bringing up in school, he responded:

> Johnson: "Oh, there's a difference, before Trump and after Trump, there's a difference. So, I think some of the students feel emboldened to do things that maybe they would not have done during The Obama administration."
> Interviewer: "Students who support Trump or students who don't support Trump?"
> Johnson: "Students who support Trump."

A Carver teacher echoed this observation, explaining that during Trump's campaign and after his election, students were more likely to use racist taunts at school:

> [it happens] all the time, all the time. It could be in a classroom where somebody says 'go eat a taco, go back to Mexico….' Kids getting on the bus—and usually they're American born kids—are told 'go back to China.' So it's given a license. And for me, I know it's always been there. So I'm actually kind of—in a perverse way—I'm happy it's out in the open.

These examples demonstrate that the 2016 election changed the culture of the schools in my study. Students were emboldened, or "given a license," to use the president's words and ideas to

bully other students. This put schools in a difficult position because they had to negotiate reprimanding students for these actions while still maintaining their nonpartisan status. This echoes other findings in the literature. One article that looks at teachers' pedagogy right before and after the 2016 election, describes how "teachers found themselves in a complicated position in the days and weeks leading up to and immediately after the 2016 presidential campaign and election. Everyday and mundane decisions were accompanied by choices that seemed more serious" (Dunn et al. 2019:446). This quote explains how changing norms affected even the most nominal aspects of the school day.

Trump's rhetoric during the campaign and his time in office changed norms around what "counted" as political or partisan. This created difficulties for teachers and administrators in general, as I described above, but in particular as they attempted to teach subjects like history, which by the nature of the subject, had more topics related to inequality. This issue also arose in other contexts—even science—where teachers struggled to teach their curriculum without ruffling feathers. One history teacher at Carver told me the following story, describing how a parent accosted her in the hallway right before she was going to present her course syllabus to parents on back-to-school night:

> On back-to-school night a woman is walking down the hall and she's giving me this look and I'm like 'is everything ok?' … and she goes 'we are going to have to have a talk.' And I say 'OMG what's going on?' and she says, 'my son is very uncomfortable in your class, all you talk about is 'white male this, that, and the other' and I was like 'oh, we're talking about the Declaration of Independence and how it said all men are created equal and at that time it meant, you know, the white male landowner who could vote, it really alienated a lot of people so it didn't have the original intent we thought…' but then she said 'and your feminist liberalism is not acceptable in the classroom.' I said, 'I'm really sorry, I try never to share my personal politics in the classroom.' And she said, 'well I can tell, he can tell.' And she just looks me up and down, and I'm like you can tell? What, from my clothes? And she started to back down when I looked confused, because really you can't tell from someone's appearance. So, then she came in the classroom, and I had to be like 'hi! Welcome to American Culture' and they all left, and I cried.

In this example, it is clear that the teacher was taken aback by this accusation from the parent. On the one hand, her surprise might have been because Carver leaned liberal, so it was indeed a smaller population of parents that would have or express an opinion like this. However, looking closely, it is clear that there was something deeper going on. A lesson on the Declaration of Independence, in which she explained that "all men are created equal" only referred to white male landowners, was not a *partisan* statement, though it was both a *political* and *factual* statement. Before 2016, students might not have thought to complain to their parents about a lesson like this, and parents might not have then felt emboldened to accost a teacher about said lesson. However, this story demonstrates that the norms around what *counts as partisan and political/acceptable* shifted during and after Trump's election. Additionally, this example illustrates how districts' focus on DEI in curricula was a potential *liability.* While Mayorga-Gallo describes liability as a phenomenon where white people are threatened by increasing diversity, in the context of schooling, diversifying curricula, or even offering a critical but truthful look at the founding fathers, became a *liability* for Carver's teachers.

This bled over into other aspects of the curriculum as well. As Dr. Thompson, the assistant superintendent at Glory, explained:

> it's a constant challenge [dealing with Trump's politics]. And I think for our teachers, it's such a tremendous challenge, because they are fearful. They're, yeah, they're fearful. I mean, our science teachers, I go into the science review cycle next year, I'm looking forward to it. They're fearful to bring up climate change. You know, we are liberal, I'd say we're a moderate-to-liberal community. Yeah, we are. We've got nine Democrats on the board and they're still afraid to bring up climate change or evolution. And so, you know, they need to be supported in teaching science.

This goes to show that even in an area with between 70–80% support for Democrat presidential candidates, these cultural changes trickled down from families to teachers—and this was in 2019, before the uproar over "critical race theory" that occurred in 2021–2022. This fear that Dr.

Thompson noted is also reflected in several studies that focus on how teachers struggled to teach students about Trump (Dunn et al. 2019; Pollock and Yoshisato 2022). Dunn et al.'s (2019) title quote encapsulates the issue at hand, describing teachers saying, "I don't want to come off as pushing an agenda."

This worked in the other direction, as well, though explosively, perhaps. To return to an example from the beginning, at Jefferson there was a contentious debate over showing Trump's inauguration. At Jefferson, between 40–50% of the community members voted for Trump in 2016, but the school board and superintendent were all Democrats. The district originally did not want to show Trump's inauguration at all. The assistant superintendent explained,

> You know, there was a lot of discussion about showing the inauguration because some felt that it would be taking a more partisan. So, you know, that was one of the points of contention. You know, we have always been of the belief system that students should be exposed to our political system. And it's not about taking a party line, but it's more about, this is what's going on. This is our system. Yeah, we have an inauguration. But you know, he's our president, you know, just by virtue of that, you know, this should be something we allow.

In the end, they decided to allow teachers to show the inauguration, but only if it directly related to their curriculum. One teacher explained,

> we were only allowed to show the inauguration if it was relevant to our curriculum. And that was the first time I've ever gotten an email about anything when it came to an inauguration. And that was a decision they made, and I think that then our superintendent, like, apologized for that. He felt that he shouldn't have given us that stipulation because it was a historical event. So, I feel like he eventually apologized for it. Because they never said that not to do that, like when Obama got reelected.

Again, something that was not seen as a purely partisan event—inauguration—*before* Trump became partisan this time around. While the simplest reason might be that the school board was full of Democrats, and therefore they only wanted to show Democrats being inaugurated, the school board's decision could also be interpreted as determining that Trump and his campaign had crossed a line into a form of partisan politics that was at odds with the school's values. For

example, the district has official commitments to diversity and inclusion, which are both in opposition to the rhetoric that Trump espoused throughout his campaign.

Tensions between Trump's Rhetoric and School Values

In addition to the changed norms around what "counted" as political or partisan, administrators and teachers at all three districts expressed difficulties and concerns about how to handle situations where the values espoused by the president conflicted with their commitments to other institutional values, like community and DEI. These tensions were worked out in different ways. On the one hand, policies were still put in place that went against Trump's values. On the other hand, while some teachers were willing to stand up for marginalized students despite the fact that this made them wade into partisan politics, others took a more explicitly neutral approach. To start with the policy side, at Jefferson, one administrator, Dr. Golan, explained that it had been stressful trying to cope with Trump's anti-LGBTQ stances while simultaneously trying to provide a safe community for LGBTQ students:

> You know, with Donald Trump being the president, there is some amount of freedom to speak more openly… But what happens with our LGBT community? I mean, that is going to impact students at school, we have to address it. We can't allow students to not to have a support system at school or to feel like at school, they have to not be who they are. So, we have to address it. And sometimes, for example… we came up with a policy to address things like locker rooms and bathrooms and things like that, and that can be a great divide. It worked out. We do have a policy. But that could be a big divide, you know, and there could be students who are very passionately, you know, very passionately for policies to protect other students. And there are on the other hand, there are those students who don't feel that way. So, in particular, at our high school, you know, where students are, tend to be a little bit more vocal about their feelings. It can be, you know, it can be difficult, because yeah, those issues don't stop. Yeah, you know, they bleed right to school.

In the particular case of locker rooms and bathrooms, Dr. Golan expressed her gratitude that the policies protecting LGBTQ students were put into place—not surprising given the Democrat makeup of the school board, but still contentious with the many Republican community

members. It was clear that even though this particular example worked out, Dr. Golan remained concerned about potential future clashes along these lines. This unfolded slightly differently at Glory, but, Dr. Thompson, the assistant superintendent at the time (and now superintendent) explained how difficult it was to both provide balance and set boundaries around the type of speech they could allow on campus:

> The 2016 election, coupled with the shooting in Florida. I think those two things further polarized our students and their families and so increase the challenge for us as a school. It continues to be the social center of the community. And to just provide a balanced voice. And you know, it's not easy. No, because sometimes the balance, you don't want to give license to people who are not sharing your values of Access for All. Or misusing that term. To suggest for example, we should let the, you know, white supremacists march on school grounds, you know, or something like that.

Here Dr. Thompson described the difficult situation at hand. She believed it was important to provide a balance but struggled when one side of that balance conflicted with the district's values. These pressures arose around Trump's election and, as she noted here, the Parkland High School shooting. However, they continued to increase, ultimately resulting in the uproar around "critical race theory" that began around a year after this conversation took place.

In addition to these administrative and policy concerns, teachers and building administrators also expressed concerns about student behavior in light of the president's values and politics. These behaviors had quite a range. On the one hand, teachers described students "writing MAGA on things" potentially to get some sort of attention. They did not describe these small behaviors garnering much of a reaction from other students. On the other hand, these incidents sometimes grew into larger altercations. One of Carver's two vice principals told the following story:

> I had a student wearing a Trump shirt. And he was very good friends with a student who was Hispanic. And the student was very offended. And actually, like, said a curse word to them, like, 'why the F are you wearing that?' And we had to really sit down and talk about it. Talk about, you know, this has definitely changed the way he perceives you. Why? How

> does that offend you? Why do you feel the need that you want to wear that shirt? Are you trying to look for a reaction?' So we really had to talk about it and kind of feel through it because I didn't want to offend anyone. You don't want to take anyone's rights. So they're talking a lot about the border. And the things he said, and we worked through the language that he used, he finally was able to say, 'I guess I do [want a reaction], because I don't feel like I'm always able to say, I'm a Trump supporter without people being against me.' So, we talked about that. We rationalized that, and by the end they were still friends. But it was it was an opportunity for the students to really talk about their feelings about the election.

In this case, the vice principal described an incident between two friends who had an altercation because the white friend wore a Trump shirt and the Latinx student felt angry because Trump regularly expressed stridently anti-immigrant sentiments that were hurtful to the student and his family. Here, the solution was to work through the feelings without commenting at all on the politics of the situation, maintaining the school's political neutrality while seemingly hearing both students. However, her description of the conversation focused more on understanding the white student's intentions behind his actions than on the effects those actions had on the Latinx student. While she explained that the students remained friends following the altercation, previous research on symbolic violence in schools suggests that hearing the vice principal prioritizing the white student's feelings could have done significant damage to the Latinx child (Coles 2016; Shannon and Escamilla 1999; Elena 2016).

Along these same lines, a history teacher at Carver explained that before the 2016 election they had held a presidential debate:

> So, the social studies dept ran it [the debate] and we had the candidates up on stage and kids were carrying MAGA things and some of the ESL students, and students from that population [Latinx students], were very upset and it [the administrator response] was largely 'well they [the pro-Trump students] can have their viewpoint too.' It was definitely a struggle because some teachers were upset, saying no, that viewpoint is offensive.

In this example, while some teachers were comfortable airing their concerns about the clash between Trump's values and the school's obligations to DEI and to community, ultimately the administration decided that it was most important to be balanced and "neutral," thus allowing

this symbolic violence to continue. On the other hand, there are certain teachers—like Maria, a Latinx English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher—who were dedicated to standing up for students in instances like this. She described sitting in many meetings translating for parents as they discussed bullying instances with administrators. She was personally passionate about DEI work and without fail always intervened in situations such as this (as described to me by several of her colleagues). In this case, students experiencing this violence *did* have an ally—but she was an ally without much institutional power to correct anything beyond what happened in front of her or cases her colleagues brought to her.

Reinvigoration of Conversations about DEI

While the schools in my study described a focus on fixing stratified outcomes that predated Trump's election, his rhetoric was seen as an *impetus* for talking about broader, structural inequalities and how they impact children in school. This was, of course, a conundrum: If a politician's rhetoric was the *cause* of these conversations, then how could they possibly be perceived as nonpartisan? At the same time, the former president's rhetoric was so deeply in opposition to the districts' committed values that they really had no choice but to do *something.* In the end, the districts in my study responded to the moment in a few different ways.

Teachers noticed that rather than outright *condemn* Trump's rhetoric, values, or policies—which would be partisan—they began to have many more professional development sessions on related topics. One teacher explained: "I guess maybe us like even our professional developments have sort of tended away from curriculum development and towards things like equity and workshops and things like that," and another teacher noted:

> I would say probably the last three years [2016–2019], equity has been the main focus all of our professional lives. All of our faculty meetings have sort of had some aspects of equity… It's been a continuous effort to educate the staff around equity issues. So I

> would say probably about two and a half, three years ago, they really took on this endeavor, and it's been a sort of an ongoing process about equity.

These examples demonstrate that the districts began their focus on equity, on DEI work, following Trump's campaign and election, and even if the two were not overtly linked, teachers saw them as related.

Next, district administrators expressed that the inflammatory nature of the 2016 election spurred conversations about inequality that were already happening in the district. One Jefferson administrator explained this, saying,

> I think part of it is societal. It seems to me as though that's all of a sudden becoming just a topic across the board. And I don't know if that's why it's become more of a topic from the education world. I mean, we've been having these discussions. I mean, a quick answer, I would probably think off the top my head would be, like our political environment. Yeah, you know, our disparities lend themselves to these conversations, we definitely had been looking at this in our districts prior to the, to the current election, but I do think that that [the election] also has something to do with it.

She explained here that Jefferson had been committed to working to fix "disparities" since before the 2016 election but that the nature of the polarization and split in society had put more pressure and focus on the conversation.

In addition to increasing professional development sessions and having "these discussions" as the Jefferson administrator put it, the schools also taught topics and espoused policies that might have become newly politicized by leveraging their pre-existing, nonpartisan values like preparing students to succeed in a diverse world and doing what is best for children. These sorts of efforts happened in various ways. First, there were events like Diversity Days and Black History Month showcases, that were reminiscent of Bell and Hartmann's (2007:910) concept of "happy talk," which they explain as "diversity without oppression." Next, there were more intense pushes to get students talking about inequality during the school day. For example, at Carver, they held a yearly Diversity Day celebration in which students ran booths with cultural

foods, in addition to other school-wide programming: This focus on diverse cultures certainly would count as "diversity without oppression." This had been going on for many years, but in 2018, it became connected to Carver's Give Voice initiative, which focused explicitly on issues of inequality. In 2018–2019, they focused on police violence, and in 2019–2020, they focused on immigration and refugees. While most of these "happy talk" events existed prior to Trump's election, they took on a new air of importance in this environment—events that barely scratched the surface of dealing with inequality between groups were lauded as actual resistance to the narratives being pushed by the White House.

In addition to the more celebratory events, all three school districts latched onto the moment to push some actual curricular content about inequality, though still encased in a veneer of political neutrality. At Jefferson, one administrator, Dr. Bates, explained how the inflammatory nature of the election spurred the district to commit to having tough conversations with students around inequality in society. She explained,

> So we established the practice at the high school of that seminar discussion, right? Every month to maintain that practice. And to build capacity around that practice. We started with easy topics. And the point was to ease into more difficult meaty topics. And the premise of starting to practice came from the 2016 election, teachers and students and administrators, everyone, the world was walking around in shock, right? Yeah, I mean, everybody experienced the same thing. And we mishandled it as a school and as a district, we said, 'Nope, we're not going to talk about it. We're not gonna address it.' So, we didn't talk to kids about it. It was bad. And I think that was a microcosm of society. But we didn't actually address it with kids. We just ignored it and moved on. So, in reflection myself and some of my colleagues said, No, like, that's a missed opportunity.

Here, Dr. Bates explained that the blowback from the 2016 election showed her and other teachers/administrators that they had to do a better job practicing having difficult conversations with students. This is another example of how the changing norms around Trump's election actually led to *more* conversations about DEI in the districts. The shock of his campaign and election encouraged these administrators to implement a new program allowing students to

discuss contentious topics. Dr. Bates described the time after the election as a "missed opportunity" for discussion because it was a difficult time to manage and had they had systems like this in place, it might have been easier to have these talks with students. Had the 2016 election *not* been so inflammatory, they might not have begun this new academic program.

At Carver, teachers and administrators took on a similar project in a different way. They decided to start the Give Voice initiative, through which all high school students read a book on one particular current events topic. This program began in the 2018–2019 school year with a focus on police brutality. It was actually built around the librarians' desire to get kids reading *The Hate U Give.* However, administrators knew this would be a contentious topic and attempted to work around this by (a) providing a choice of books rather than assigning one in particular and (b) teaching "both sides" by inviting local police officers to come in and speak to students. Dr. Gold, the assistant superintendent, explained the situation the following way:

> So, last year, there was some, I won't say pushback, but questions and concerns, about we were going to depict policemen. We have policemen in our districts, we have a very, very good relationship with our police department. That doesn't always happen. And when I spoke to the building principal, we talked about how we were going to do this? We decided, okay, let's get them [the police department] in. Let's talk to them. So, when parents saw that [the police were involved], they were okay with it. And we were going to do it in a very respectful way. So, it worked out very nicely… And I think we only had two parents that complained. And what you do is, you bring that parent in, you bring the community member in, and you listen… if it really was going to be a major problem, we would not have done it. You know, it wasn't something that we had to do.

Here, Dr. Gold describes the careful balance they struck while implementing DEI-related curricular content. They made sure to offer "both sides" of the issue by inviting the local police department. Importantly, she emphasizes that this was *not* something they would have done if it was going to be a "major problem." So, Carver personnel decided that this was an initiative they could undertake under the guise of preparing students for global society. However, in deciding to do this one book program about police brutality, Carver's administrators were still deeply

concerned about the *liability* of the initiative (Mayorga-Gallo 2019). This concern about liability led to a decision to temper the original message of the program by offering multiple books and by bringing in the police department to talk to students. The following year, which would turn out to include the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, they chose a no-less-controversial topic: immigration and refugees.

In addition to one book programs and homeroom discussion, districts redoubled efforts to diversify the curriculum, especially in English class. When asked how they managed students or parents upset by curriculum changes or more diverse books, administrators tended to note that there was always an element of choice in the curriculum—as in, white students or parents who were unhappy could always opt out of books with themes or characters they did not approve of. It was not a coincidence that while Carver, for instance, was adding authors of color to the English Language Arts (ELA)/English curricula, they were also revamping the structure of their English courses to hinge much more closely on the matter of student choice. On the other hand, when books of this nature *were* taught to all students, teachers were unprepared to navigate the results when the discussion inevitably took a political turn. One instance in particular stands out. At Carver, 8th grade students were reading *To Kill a Mockingbird,* and a Black parent checked with the teacher beforehand to ensure that the N-word would not be read aloud in the classroom. Despite the teacher's reassurance that this would not occur, a student read the word out, making several Black students in the class deeply uncomfortable. To make matters worse, the teacher did not address it and just continued with the lesson. While a district administrator recalled this story to me as a success—they navigated the situation with the teacher and the parent well, and everyone was happy—Maria an ESL teacher deeply involved in DEI work in the district, told me that the parent felt ignored. This situation demonstrates one of the flaws in constructing

inequality as an politically neutral problem of representation: Books are inherently political, and in denying this, schools fail to prepare teachers to handle the subject matter in class.

Limits to These Efforts

In the end, despite the fact that to a certain extent schools were readily reacting to Trump's rhetoric, their focus on maintaining political neutrality amid a crisis for their most vulnerable students severely limited what they were able to accomplish. Because of the focus on political neutrality, for example, the schools continued doing mock election debates and minimized the potential symbolic violence occurring within students' interpersonal interactions, as I discussed above. Additionally, because of the focus on political neutrality, even the curricular content that engaged the most with structural inequality—for example, the Give Voice initiative or other initiatives to diversify ELA or history curricula—was always *qualified* by allowing students to opt out, giving them choice, or bringing in "both sides" of the issue, like with the police department invited to speak about police brutality. District leaders discussed this dilemma with me in our interviews as well. In the following quote, Carver's assistant superintendent explains the struggle for neutrality:

> This last three years [2016–2019], there has been no greater struggle for us than trying to create that neutrality, but also to model appropriate behavior. So really it is about giving voice to everyone. And being appropriate in how you interact. So that's really how we look at it. It's, it's, it's difficult. But to me, there's this line between what you politically believe in in terms of policy, and procedures and laws, and then how you feel about a human being. So, we focus more on the social and emotional wellbeing of our entire staff and of our students, and really look at more about how we treat people than we do about what your opinion is about. Whether you feel there should be a stricter immigration law, like, we're not going to go there… kids come with their set of values and their beliefs. And we're not here to try to change anybody's values or beliefs, what we want to change is people's behavior towards each other. So that's how we get around it. So, for instance, you could read one of the three books that we're offering, even if you do not believe in immigration. You can choose a book about Europeans, and you can gain some information about the human beings in these books. It's very hard.

In this example, it is clear that while the assistant superintendent felt empowered to take *certain*

actions against Trump's rhetoric, ultimately, she would not comment on specific policies or force students to read books about refugees or immigrants of color. On the other hand, students and their parents *were* comfortable commenting on these policies, as was demonstrated by the teachers and administrators who argued that Trump's election "gave a license" to right-wing students and parents to say what they wanted. In these data, the districts focused on civility and neutrality, which potentially left students vulnerable. If the districts had focused on combatting Trump's rhetoric more head-on, regardless of norms around political neutrality, right-wing parents and community members would not have had the power to control what counts as political in school. As is demonstrated throughout the findings section, these schools felt it was their duty to respond to the moment by teaching about inequality but only in a very specific way that they deemed "politically neutral" or "nonpartisan," even though it is not *neutral* to allow students to opt-out of learning about inequality, and it is not "nonpartisan" to allow right-wing parents, community members, and political rhetoric to determine what counts as too political for school. These sorts of DEI initiatives echo Melamed's (2011) "official" antiracism focused on representation, which, she argues, is rooted in the ultimate goal of maintaining current structures.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I discussed the complicated third tenet of the DEI Doctrine—a commitment to nonpartisanship and political neutrality that extended to DEI efforts in schools. I gave a brief description of this nonpartisan understanding of inequality and then detailed how the political events of the last six years have made this an extremely difficult line to walk. Trump's rhetoric during his campaign and his presidency politicized a number of values like diversity and inclusion that schools had already included on the list of districts' nonpartisan values. This led to tension in the school as suddenly it became difficult to both allow students to support their

president by repeating his rhetoric and simultaneously protect vulnerable students from bullying. This actually reinvigorated conversations about inequality and equity in the schools in my study, as districts attempted to respond to this political rhetoric but in ways that maintained their nonpartisan status. These districts maintained their commitment to political neutrality even when they were challenged by a culture that said what they were doing was partisan. They maintained this commitment in a few ways: by doubling down on their commitment to representational diversity through "happy talk" celebrations, and then offering an option to "opt out" or have curricular choice when dealing with topics related to inequality that were not celebratory (like police brutality). On the one hand, Trump's election reinvigorated conversations about inequality-related issues, which districts had by using their commitment to fixing inequality/teaching about inequality as "cover" for any perceived breach of political neutrality. On the other hand, their commitment to political neutrality was not completely decoupled from organizational life—they did things like offer an opt out, offer choices, and protect students' free speech rather than protect students of color from bullying. Those are all instances where the commitment to political neutrality mitigated, or one might even argue canceled out, DEI efforts entirely. A norm about presenting "both sides" of a structural issue gave power to right-wing parents, community members, and rhetoric because it allowed them to decide when the definition of "neutral" changed.

This third tenet of the DEI Doctrine is related to the other two tenets. As I demonstrated in the previous chapters, when asked about the problems with inequality that their schools and districts faced, district leaders and teachers from all three districts emphasized a lack of diversity and representation. In the previous chapter, I detailed how this construction of inequality led to DEI efforts focused on diversity. Here, I demonstrate how this focus on representational

diversity allowed districts to pursue *some* discussions of inequality but only in a way that implied that a lack of representation itself was the root of the inequality. By conceptualizing inequality as a lack of representation, they were able to discuss inequality without wading into more political issues. In other words, while these discussions of inequality were not all light, celebratory events, they were, effectively, discussions of "diversity without oppression" in order to maintain their political neutrality (Bell and Hartmann 2007). This commitment to political neutrality is *also* related to racial ideology. Ultimately, Mayorga-Gallo (2019) argues that the four tenets of diversity ideology she finds add up to an "amorphous diversity," impacting how her participants interpret their social worlds. Her final tenet of diversity ideology is "liability;" her participants demonstrated concern for the possible consequences of increased diversity. District personnel did not express concern regarding the consequences of diversity in their districts, but they *did* have concerns about liability. This liability, however, surrounded concerns about political neutrality. While they were committed to reducing and educating about inequality, this commitment to political neutrality was equally important, and constrained their DEI efforts.

Chapter 5: DEI Doctrine and District DEI Initiatives Post-2020

"I think there are higher stakes this time. And I think the people involved are really… trying to make sure we're holding the district accountable. And I think the thought is that we really can't afford to fail this time, because these are our kids, and we failed [for] too long… This needs to be the time when change actually comes."

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2020 was a watershed moment in world history, as a pandemic raged across the globe, changing too many aspects of society to detail here. Then, within the context of this chaotic time period, the United States experienced another *event* (Sewell 1996), one which would dominate our culture for months: the police murder of George Floyd. This murder was the latest in an all-too-familiar story of white police officers enacting unchecked violence against Black individuals. This time, though, the response permeated every institution in the country. Whether it was the context of the pandemic, previous police murders, or some combination of the two, the Black Lives Matter movement gained new levels of support (Parker, Horowitz, and Anderson 2020) or notoriety (Updegrove et al. 2020), depending on the community. This was undoubtedly an important moment for racial justice, and, as is emphasized in the quote opening this chapter, school districts certainly felt the call for change.

In the previous three chapters, I established the set of rules that governed how suburban schools made sense of and responded to inequality in the years following Trump's election. I call this set of rules the DEI Doctrine, and it consists of three tenets: schools feel a professional obligation to fix inequality and to educate students about inequality, both of which tend to occur through DEI initiatives; DEI initiatives are conceptualized within a diversity framework; and DEI initiatives must be politically neutral. Without the twin crises of COVID-19 and George

Floyd's murder, that would be the end of this dissertation. Together, these historic events completely encapsulated the schooling (and, frankly, *living)* experience in the United States, beginning the first moment schools made the choice to go virtual and continuing when calls for racial justice played a major role in summer planning for the 2020–2021 school year. The pandemic itself mostly exists in the background of the story here, like an elaborate set created for a theater production. All meetings and interviews described in this chapter took place on Zoom or over the phone. Black History Month celebrations were all virtual. Any DEI initiatives were evaluated and implemented within the context of the ongoing pandemic. However, despite the stage being set by the pandemic, it was the racial justice uprising that followed Floyd's murder that put DEI on the tip of everyone's tongue—changing the contents of this project from a fringe curiosity to a center stage topic.

Both the onset of the pandemic and George Floyd's murder were undeniably disruptive to many, if not all, institutions in the United States. Scholars have studied the causes and subsequent effects of disruptions in various ways. First, organizational scholars tend to conceptualize disruptions as "exogenous shocks," meaning that events that occur outside the organization in question significantly disrupt or "shock" the typical way of doing business within the organization (Corbo et al. 2016). Next, political scientists have argued that disruptions can lead to "policy windows," in which previously conceptualized policy ideas can be marketed to stakeholders more effectively because the particular moment in society increases support for the ideas (Kingdon and Stano 1984). Additionally, cultural sociologists have conceptualized disruptions as "unsettled times" (Swidler 1986). Swidler (1986:278–279) describes unsettled times as, "periods of social transformation," and she argues that "bursts of ideological activism occur in periods when competing ways of organizing action are developing or contending for

dominance." Swidler (1986) argues that these unsettled moments result in various ideologies competing for dominance, which is then sealed by ritual. Political sociologists have also argued that crisis can lead to institutional change (e.g., Mahoney 2000) and asserted that there is a similar distinction between "normal time" and a "critical juncture" (Hogan and Doyle 2007). Hogan and Doyle (2007) argue that a "critical juncture" consists of a crisis, a period of ideational change, and then a culminating policy change. While Swidler (Jepperson and Swidler 1994) and political sociologists (Hogan and Doyle 2007) have taken issue with the way subsequent scholars have interpreted "unsettled times" or "critical junctures" too loosely, it is hard to imagine that the time period in question—2020–2021—would not qualify as unsettled, in comparison to the previous time period I have covered in this dissertation (2019–early 2020). Ultimately, while these theories come from divergent theoretical traditions, they each emphasize that big changes in society then tend to open the door for more change (Griswold 2012).

Given the disruption, shock, unsettling, policy window, or critical juncture existing between 2020–2021, this literature would predict significant change—or at least predict the *potential* for significant change. COVID-19 disrupted every element of schooling, from curricular content that had to be rewritten to work virtually to new technology teachers and students had to get used to, and a million other changes in between. It is hard to imagine a scenario in which the pandemic did not significantly alter the schooling experience. It is within the context of this gargantuan shock that the secondary shock—the movement for racial justice following Floyd's murder—occurred. In previous work, my co-authors and I have argued that *constrained* disruptions—disruptions that only affect one or a handful of elements of the school system—are the ones that lead to more significant, long-term change (Handsman et al. 2022). In that article, we hypothesize that a more wholesale shock to the school system might actually

have had a different effect; we wondered if too many elements of organizational life were in chaos, whether district leaders would have the bandwidth and/or political capital to make significant policy changes beyond putting out immediate fires. Whether significant change occurs or not, institutional theory would predict that in the wake of these shocks, school districts would change at least on the surface to maintain legitimacy in the institutional field (Meyer and Rowan 1977). The particular nature of this case adds one other element to consider: The school districts in question were already doing DEI work, even if it was both limited and not particularly well publicized.

In this case, school districts were facing public pressure to commit to DEI work, which they were already doing to a certain degree, and to do it *quickly,* all while continuing to manage schools during a pandemic. What happened when these districts were pressured to do more than they were already doing, or at least make their ongoing DEI work more visible to various stakeholders (including teachers, parents, and students)? This is the question I take up in this chapter, examining (1) how these twin crises impacted suburban schools' institutional myths ("widespread cultural ideas that provide a rational theory of how organizations ought to operate" [Hallett and Hawbaker 2020:4]), which already included a commitment to both ameliorating inequality in their districts and educating students about inequality in society, and (2) how these districts coped with the increasingly public emphasis on this institutional obligation. I find that the shock included considerable pressure for districts to reaffirm their values around inequality, which mainly stayed consistent but broadened to address *racism* specifically, not just race as an identity category. Unsurprisingly, I find that district responses to this pressure varied by political makeup of the towns. I find that this pressure led to districts recommitting or doubling down on their previous DEI work, guided for the most part by the same racial ideology focused on

diversity. Despite focusing on racism, and specifically anti-Black racism, districts still followed the tenets of the DEI Doctrine, focusing on representational diversity and political neutrality. In other words, the DEI Doctrine essentially *absorbed the shocks* of 2020, guiding district responses to these disruptions.

Finally, I find that unlike in previous chapters where districts followed similar trajectories, they each made organization-level decisions in slightly different ways. Whereas Carver and Jefferson each struggled to effect significant change, Glory took a more measured approach and has had more success. At this point, it is too soon to measure whether DEI initiatives put in place in the last 18 months have had measurable impact on inequality in these districts. Given this, I am defining success in the following way: concrete plans that are specific and action oriented. For example, in this metric, a *successful* DEI plan would look something like this: "Create a K–12 course overview with language accessibility" (Glory's plan) and a *less* successful DEI plan would look something like this: "provide all learners with safe, nurturing, inclusive, and flexible learning environments" (Carver's plan). Whereas Glory's includes a specific *task,* Carver's is very vague.

In the end, I argue that the first two districts' DEI commitments ended up decoupled from on-the-ground, organizational life, unlike in 2019. On the other hand, Glory's commitments remained more tightly coupled to organizational practices. Even though districts became more concerned about *racism* and not just race as an element of DEI, this concern still was incorporated into their pre-existing diversity ideology-powered framework. There was an exception at Glory, though, where they took more time and listened to the community. I argue that the differences are likely due to demographic characteristics of the districts, as well as due to leadership structures at the districts (Spillane 2006). Carver, a racially and socioeconomically

diverse district, held a strong belief that they were on the cutting edge of DEI work. When the shock occurred, they went too big too fast in order to maintain this belief. Jefferson, a politically split district, put all their DEI work on the shoulders of one Black, queer administrator, who then bore the burden not only of the work itself but also of the backlash to the work. Glory had both a strong Democrat base in the town and a strong relationship with its parent community, leading its administrators to work slowly and steadily with parents as true partners in their DEI efforts.

DATA AND METHODS

The arguments in this chapter draw on a few different data sources. First, I draw on DEI policy documents from across the 60 area school districts. There was quite a bit of variation in these documents, though there were two types that came up somewhat frequently. The first was a boilerplate letter that circulated following the police murder of George Floyd. Twenty-four out of 60 districts signed this letter, adding their own specifications to the final paragraph listing their next steps toward creating an equitable school district. The second was a school board policy, Policy 832: Educational Equity. The Pennsylvania School Board (PBSA) made this optional policy available to school districts in the summer of 2020, though they had been working on it for several years prior. Policy 832 is an optional, customizable school board policy giving Pennsylvania school boards an official way to institutionalize their commitments to equity. The PBSA provided a general structure for the policy, but school districts can fully customize the content. School districts (and really, school boards) had the option to tailor this policy to fit their districts' needs, and while they do not need to use the policy at all, many districts are in the process of passing it. In addition to these two common documents, the collected documents from the districts include: equity plans, equity information pages, details about equity teams, definitions of related terms, and other communications to families detailing how they plan to

continue DEI work in the district.

In addition to these documents from the broader 60-district sample, this chapter draws on the 32 interviews I conducted starting in July 2020. Fourteen interviews took place that summer, 8 the following year, and 10 in Fall 2021. This chapter also draws on ethnographic observations of 85 school board meetings, curriculum committee meetings, and Equity Taskforce (Carver), Equitable Practices (Glory), and Curriculum (Jefferson) meetings, totaling hundreds of hours of video footage. I also kept tabs on six parent/community Facebook groups, two from each district. My insights into Carver's post-2020 DEI work are the most in-depth, as over half of the interviews came from teachers, administrators, and parents at this school, and I was a member of one of the Equity Taskforce subcommittees in the 2020–2021 school year. As I will discuss in depth in the section on Carver, this committee has since been disbanded. However, my participation in the committee allowed unique insight into the DEI work at Carver, as well as access to individuals who were angry about the disbanding of the committee and thus agreed to speak with me after that occurred. Given my slight "insider status" at Carver, the data from this chapter is perhaps the most unbalanced out of the dissertation chapters; I simply have significantly more interview data from Carver in 2021 than any other district. I was able to get 14 interviews from Glory between July 2020–Fall 2021. Additionally, in late 2020, Jefferson instituted a new email system that blocked any external messages. While I had some minimal success reaching out to people on Facebook and Linkedin, my insights on Jefferson are largely based on Facebook group posts, documents, and, of course, school board meetings.

FINDINGS

DEI Doctrine Tenet 1: Professional Responsibility to Fix and Educate about Inequality

DEI as the "national agenda."

As is detailed throughout the previous chapters, the districts in my study—both the larger sample and the case studies—had a commitment to reducing and educating about inequality that predated the twin crises of 2020. However, as Black Lives Matter came more and more into the zeitgeist, school districts faced pressure to increase this commitment or at least publicly reaffirm it. Interviewees described this to me in a few different ways. One white female teacher, when describing her district's equity work between 2020–2021, explained that "the summer during COVID-19, it became the national agenda to break into this equity work." This quote is not necessarily surprising, as we all experienced this significant moment along with these school districts. It demonstrates that school districts were not insulated from this "national agenda" but were right on the forefront of demands for change.

A different teacher, also a white woman, took this statement one step forward, explaining that she and her colleagues believed the school should be held accountable for change. She said,

> I think with the whole shift across the country, I feel like it's the first time, honestly, that white people have been talking about it [racism] this much. And I know that I, along with other colleagues, teachers, administrators, and then even parents and community members are trying to make sure we're holding the district accountable for following through with this [DEI initiative].

Here this teacher reiterates the statement in the quote above, asserting that this is a "shift across the country." In our conversation, she was slightly sheepish about this statement, a hint of embarrassment clear in her tone as she explained that it was the first time she and her white colleagues had really discussed racism in their school. Despite the fact that Carver had several DEI initiatives ongoing before this became the "national agenda," not all teachers' experiences at the district had DEI at the fore.

Carver's Assistant Superintendent confirmed this in our third conversation in Fall 2021. When I asked her how she was doing and how the district's initiatives were unfolding, she said

the following:

> it's been a challenging and interesting 20 months, let's say. Once COVID hit we were pretty much in a mode of trying to survive and find a way to teach kids, all kids… but then the George Floyd incident happened. That incident kind of pushed things—people who wouldn't have normally seen this as something to tackle got on board.

Here, she confirms that the "incident" pushed people to be involved in (and concerned about) the district's DEI work who would not have otherwise been interested. On the other hand, a Black teacher who had been deeply involved in Jefferson's DEI work for years offered the following perspective on this "national agenda" in Summer 2020, saying, "Right now I'm pessimistic about it only because I feel like it's just a reaction to what's going on with George Floyd." He believed that his colleagues' new interest in DEI would fade when Floyd was no longer in the news. All in all, these interview excerpts demonstrate that DEI was no less at the forefront for schools than it was for anyone else following the "shock" of Floyd's murder, although it remained an open question how long everyone would pay attention or how effective their efforts would be.

Making DEI efforts more visible.

On September 17, 2020, Carver School District's Supervisor of Special Education addressed a group of teachers, administrators, and community members at the district's inaugural Equity Taskforce meeting, saying, "our country is in a state of social unrest right now, so I think that made people's eyes open to some harsh realities of some inequities in this country, particularly in our school systems." This quote is clearly in sync with the examples I shared in the previous section. However, she went on to clarify that this moment was an opportunity to "memorialize the work we've already done, in a shared document [a public equity plan]." In her brief speech, Ms. Trever emphasized that while the "social unrest" in the country might be prompting more of a focus on DEI work, this work was *already happening* in the district but needed to be concretized in a document for the public to see.

The previous chapters of my dissertation also confirm that indeed all three districts were already engaged in DEI efforts. Interview participants and administrators at school board meetings also continued to drive this home. At one Jefferson school board meeting in February 2021, one administrator stated the following:

> I think it's important to simply recognize that this is has been our district established mission. And we've noted our proud traditions and our diverse community. So this focus on equity and cultural proficiency is not new, it's just a little bit more focused. And we've put some additional resources to ensure that we're moving in a positive direction.

Here this administrator explains that while the work was already happening, it was now going to be both more focused and better resourced. In that sense, the "disruption" opened the door for Jefferson administrators to further the work that was already ongoing. Teachers also noticed the increased visibility of DEI efforts. One teacher noted a clear distinction between DEI work "before" and DEI work "after." She said,

> We can call it phase one [pre-2020]. I really think, at least from my perspective, and the work that me and the colleagues I surround myself with do, there was a ton of stuff happening even before it became the 'it thing' to do.

Another teacher expressed some frustration with the change, saying that in Summer 2020,

> there really was a feeling that we were starting from doing nothing, that made me feel like... what have I been doing? We certainly have ways to improve but we have been doing something. That didn't really sit right with me. How do we tell parents about everything that's already happening?

Thus DEI work was already happening across the three case study districts, and at least 19 of the districts in the area were also conducting some amount of DEI work before 2020 (as demonstrated by publicly available documents). In fact, DEI work was happening across the *state* before 2020, though it became more formalized, public, and visible in the wake of public demand following Floyd's murder. The PBSA began work on an optional, customizable school board policy regarding equity in 2018. In a casual phone conversation, the Senior Director of

Governance for the PBSA, Davelyn Smeltzer, explained that they developed the policy because school districts were *already* looking for guidance about how to incorporate equity into their school districts before 2020. In the end, they decided to publish this policy in June 2020 to help school districts that were being called upon to formalize the DEI work they were doing or to begin new DEI initiatives. However, she emphasized that even though the policy became public in the wake of Floyd's murder, they had taken their time crafting it, demonstrating that DEI concerns were not new for the state, either.

DEI "talk" addresses racism, not just race.

While DEI efforts were not new to these districts, there was a slight shift in the tenor of the "talk" on this subject. In the past, DEI efforts were race conscious—and, as I have argued previously, none of the case study districts were "colorblind" ideologically. However, DEI talk was *broader* than talk about race. Many of the "happy talk" (Bell and Hartman 2007) events that I described in chapters 2 and 3 were focused on celebrating *cultural* diversity. While race is certainly an aspect of cultural diversity, race and racism were not the focus of these events. After all, while Black culture and Black people can certainly be celebrated, combating anti-Black racism is not itself a celebratory topic. So, while I do not see DEI work making an abrupt entrance into suburban schools, the laser-focus on race, and specifically the focus on *racism*, points to a broadening of the conversation.

Broadly, about a third of the districts out of the 60 in this sample adopted a version of a Black Lives Matter at School Resolution, which was edited by Jesse Hagopian and Denisha Jones as part of a social justice effort spearheaded by the National Education Association (NEA; see https://neaedjustice.org/black-lives-matter-at-school/). Districts were encouraged to put forth this resolution to both recognize a specific Black Lives Matter day at school *and* work toward

equity in general. The text of this resolution is decidedly focused on *racism,* not just race. It begins, “WHEREAS, in response to historic and systemic racism, discrimination, and violence perpetrated against Black Americans, a nationwide movement has arisen to assert that Black Lives Matter.” In addition to the NEA’s resolution, the PBSA *also* offered a template for Pennsylvania school districts to use. This template offered districts space to add in the specific DEI efforts they planned to make, saying,

> *This resolution is a template and should be revised based on local context to reflect the needs and commitments of your board and school community. The final sentence provides an opportunity for each board to include action steps to demonstrate their commitment to equity and should be revised or removed based on local actions.*

This was one way districts could put out an official statement without having to pass the 832 policy. Twenty-four out of the 60 districts had this letter publicly available. This template also focused on racism, specifically, stating, for example,

> **WHEREAS,** we must recognize that racism and hate have no place in our schools and society. However, we must understand that racism is systemic, and it is unconsciously and consciously rooted into our institutions, policies, and practices. Consequently, we acknowledge that we must look at our own school policies and practices through an anti-racist and equity lens to address traces of racism and inequity that still exist within our own school community.

Clearly the official word from the state on down was that districts should not use this moment to simply continue “happy talk,” but should be sure to fully acknowledge racism as a systemic inequality.

In addition to signing these resolutions, Glory School District school board put out the following:

> [Glory District] Statement Against Racism: Recognizing the diversity of our community, The School District of Glory is committed to and accountable for advancing equity and excellence for all of our students. We, in the School District of Glory Township, endeavor to provide equitable opportunities for high level, meaningful, and engaging learning experiences for each and every student, regardless of racial/ethnic background, economic condition or other dimension of identity or difference. We recognize that in

> order to achieve Educational Equity we must apply principles of fairness and justice in the allocation of resources and work toward the elimination of institutional barriers to access and opportunity. We aim to ensure that funding, policies, practices, and initiatives will enable every student to receive what they need to maximize their success. In order to foster growth toward equity, we must engage in continuous reflection and ongoing measurement of our efforts. **While we do not believe it is our place to issue statements in response to comments made by other elected officials, we do believe that it is important for us to make a strong statement condemning all racism and the cruel actions that have taken the lives of people of color. Regardless of our politics, it is our responsibility as human beings to speak out against discriminatory and racist actions in any form. The events of recent weeks have affected all of us deeply. Emotions are high and people are reactive. Many in our community are in pain, but not necessarily for the same reasons. Racism is a human issue. It is systemic and pervasive and affects our children and our community. Our hearts go out to all who have been affected by these events. We, as a Board, recognize that Black Lives Matter. We recognize that Black lives are the lives being threatened and black lives are the lives being taken. Racial inequities harm our children. Evidence shows that black students are more likely to be suspended, more likely to be arrested at school and implicit bias toward black children is evident as early a preschool. Racism runs counter to our district's mission and will not be tolerated in our school or our community.**

The first part of the statement is the district's Equity Statement, which had been official since the beginning of the 2019–2020 school year. The second half of the statement (in bold) illustrates the expansion that I am discussing here. While they still took care to maintain a veneer of political neutrality, they put concerns about racism—and specifically concerns about how racism affects Black students—center stage. It is possible to imagine the district simply restating their extant Equity Statement in the wake of Floyd's murder, but this disruption did affect how the district conceptualized its responsibility to fix inequality.

The Jefferson Superintendent, who was pushed out of the district later that year, likely for political reasons, made a similar statement at a school board meeting in September 2020. He addressed an unfriendly crowd, saying, "we need to talk about societal issues [in school]. The Black Lives Matter movement has been talked about, social justice has been talked about, it's started to come up in K–12 schooling environments." He paused to read aloud the district's

mission statement and shared values statement, which, similarly to the first paragraph of Glory's statement, was official before 2020. He then went on to say the following:

> There's been a lot of discussion about [the district] supporting or denouncing Black Lives Matter. We recognize that all lives cannot matter if Black lives do not. It is not a discriminatory viewpoint and it doesn't mess with our relationship with the local law enforcement community. To suggest this is inappropriate in our classrooms is contradictory to our mission statement and values. We believe in advocating for minoritized groups. As dedicated educators and advocates we must acknowledge that it is our responsibility to not only understand and recognize racial justice but to understand that this is an opportunity for growth in our community.

Once again, this administrator reiterated pre-existing values, all of which add up to a pre-existing commitment to reducing inequality. However, this disruption, this "unsettled time" shifted the dialogue to be more focused on racism. In this moment, though, Dr. Gambino used up his political capital in the district in order to put racial justice and the fight against racism in the forefront of the district's mission.

Differences in response by political leaning.

As is to be expected in such a politically diverse area of the country, the districts in the larger sample responded to this moment differently depending on their political leaning. As is detailed in Table 7, about half of districts that leaned Republican had no public response to Floyd's murder in 2020, while only 16% of districts that leaned Democrat and 11% of politically split districts had no public response. Additionally, some majority Republican districts dealt with major backlash to attempts at DEI work. For example, parents at Owen J. Roberts school district launched a campaign called "make OJR great again," mirroring former President Trump's rhetoric. Additionally, as is displayed in Figure 7, some of the 60 districts publicly committed to one or two DEI initiatives, including nine mentioning gathering more data on equity in their district, 16 mentioning diversifying curriculum, 12 mentioning diverse hiring, 12 mentioning hiring an equity consultant, 19 mentioning forming an equity team or committee in the district,

and 21 mentioning writing an equity plan. Overall, 46 districts had some kind of public acknowledgement of the events of 2020, and 19 clearly described DEI work that had begun before 2020.

Table 7: DEI Documents by Political Makeup of District

DEI Documents Post-2020	Leans Republican	Leans Democrat	Politically Split
Yes	9	21	16
No	8	4	2

The districts that passed resolutions or 832 policies were all majority Democrat. To give some additional context, one solidly Democrat district sent the following message to families:

> The death of George Floyd, and the subsequent protests, have deeply impacted our community. The racism that was at the heart of Mr. Floyd's death, and the deaths of far too many other people of color, must be replaced by peace and acceptance, especially at a time when the nation is suffering and needs to come together. One benefit of being part of a close-knit school community is that we strive to create a safe and nurturing environment for our children, which shields them from the harsh realities of the world. Moments like this, challenge each of us to confront difficult topics such as race, privilege, and discrimination. While these conversations may be difficult to have, it is essential that they take place so that the troubling events we are currently experiencing, do not continue and are not repeated.

In this message, the administrator clearly identified racism as the culprit and did not try to gloss over the impact the tragedy had on the community. It is important to note, though, that despite the left-leaning community, there was still a focus on "peace and acceptance" rather than systemic change.

On the other hand, out of the 17 districts in the sample that leaned Republican, only about half had publicly available communications, and these communications were slightly different. One district sent the following,

> In Avon Grove, we want every student to feel connected, accepted and valued. This doesn't mean we are teaching new theories about race, but rather working to ensure that our educational environments consider all lenses and that opportunities are open to all students.

Here there is no acknowledgment of Floyd's murder or of racism—it is simply defensive and reinforces the commitment to political neutrality.

Finally, one politically-split district sent the following message to its families:

> As an educational institution, it is not our role to convey a particular viewpoint on emotionally charged topics. Telling people what to think, to believe and to do doesn't work. Our role is to "Show students where to look, not tell them what to see." In doing that, we need to make certain we have presented students with a balance of differing perspectives without the influence of our own personal viewpoints. We are positioned perfectly to create the forum to bring differing viewpoints together, build relationships and build understanding and empathy; those are the ingredients for changing hearts and progress-oriented actions. There are those who will read this email and state I haven't said enough; others will say I've gone too far. Some will search for a particular agenda, ideology or political view. And others will find a single sentence, phrase or word that can be taken in a way I didn't intend. These mindsets only hinder open and honest dialog. Our conversations have become clenched, tense and guarded; paralyzed in some cases in fear of saying something wrong and being perceived in an unintended way. Until we gather again in September, I respectfully suggest alternative mindsets.
>
> 1. Give people who engage in difficult conservations the benefit of the doubt when it comes to intent and language.
> 2. Question your own knowledge. What don't I know? What don't I understand? What is the basis of other's differing opinions?
> 3. Do not classify others as good or bad; right or wrong.
> 4. Don't tell others what to think or do.
> 5. Build new relationships so others know what's in your heart.
> 6. Regardless of your personal views, listen to what is in others' hearts; it's rarely evil.
> 7. Start by simply saying, "Hello."

Here, the administrator once again emphasizes that they did not focus on particular viewpoints, and that they kept things politically neutral. He also overtly acknowledges that some might take offense to his message. He clearly wanted to acknowledge the unrest in the country and provide context for potential ongoing DEI-related conversations but in a sense that simply saying "hello" could potentially combat racism. The range of these messages—from a condemnation of racism, to a message just about ignoring current events, to an administrator trying to split the difference and remain neutral in the face of the shock—demonstrates the way political demographics impact how districts responded to the shocks of 2020.

Summary.

In this section, I detail how the "disruptions" in question affected school districts' institutional commitments to fixing inequality. I find that districts experienced a call to reaffirm their commitment to DEI work as part of this "national agenda" or because it was suddenly the "it thing" to do. Despite the newfound attention on DEI, I also demonstrate that some districts'—including my case studies—commitment to this work predated the disruption. However, the disruption added pressure to make DEI work more publicly visible and changed the focus from race as a cultural identity to *racism,* and specifically anti-Black racism, as a significant social problem. Finally, I demonstrate that the effects of this shift were widespread across the 60 districts in the area, with 46 out of the 60 either reinvigorating extant DEI initiatives or beginning new ones. I also demonstrate how the political leaning of these districts unsurprisingly affected how they chose to engage in DEI work. In the following section, I turn to the DEI initiatives themselves, detailing how each of the three case study districts went about responding to this shock.

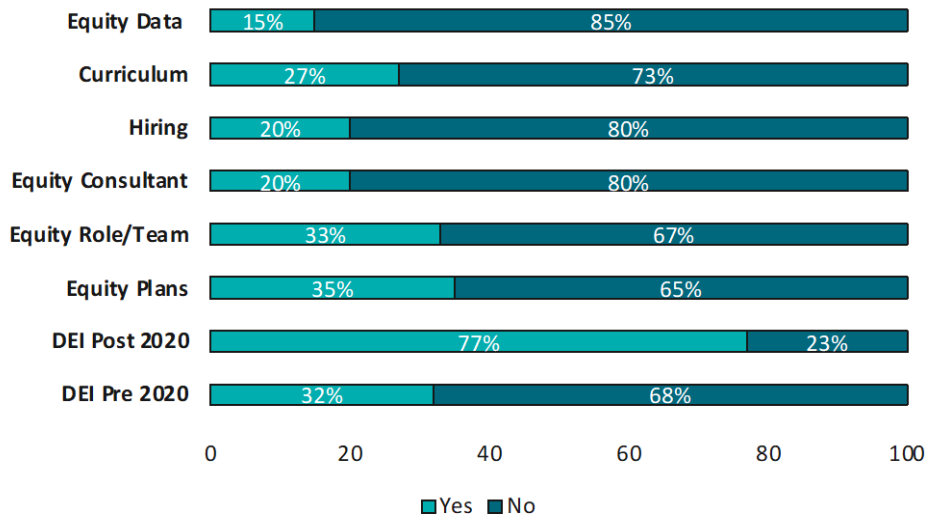
DEI Doctrine Tenet 2: DEI Efforts Post-2020

As was demonstrated in the previous section, school districts felt the need to reaffirm their commitment to DEI work in the wake of Floyd's murder. What, though, did these commitments look like? In this section, I will start by offering a bigger picture view of DEI efforts across the 60 districts. I will then go into detail to explain the commonalities between DEI efforts in the case study districts. In the sections to follow, I will offer a deeper description of how DEI efforts unfolded between Summer 2020–Winter 2022 in each district, demonstrating how the three districts each approached the work differently.

As I discussed briefly in the last section, there were two common resolutions going

around the school districts. Twenty-four districts publicized their signing of the PBSA's letter (and it is possible more signed but did not make the letter available on their website). These letters, once again, emphasized *racism* rather than just race, and had a space where districts could input their own equity goals. Using the customizable portions of these letters, in addition to commitments shared in other, less standardized documents, I was able to get a sense of the sorts of DEI efforts districts committed to during this time. As displayed in Figure 7, some of the 60 districts publicly committed to one or two DEI initiatives, including nine mentioning gathering more data on equity in their district, 16 mentioning diversifying curriculum, 12 mentioning diverse hiring, 12 mentioning hiring an equity consultant, 19 mentioning forming an equity team or committee in the district, and 21 mentioning writing an equity plan. Overall, 46 districts had some kind of public acknowledgement of the events of 2020, and 19 clearly described DEI work that had begun before 2020.

Figure 7: Public DEI Initiatives after 2020



The case study districts also had some similarities in their equity commitments. First, all three districts emphasized commitments to improving instruction and diversifying curricular

content, and all three emphasized trying to hire a more racially diverse teaching staff and improving DEI professional development sessions for teachers. Glory and Carver both emphasized parent and community engagement and Glory and Jefferson both emphasized data-driven decision-making. At the time of writing, all three districts have passed PBSA's 832 policy including these ideas, but importantly, they did not all pass their 832s at the same time. Carver passed it in February 2021, Jefferson in May 2021, and Glory waited until January 2022. Despite the similarities in the districts' equity goals, they each made very different decisions about how to proceed beginning in Summer 2020, and I will demonstrate that these decisions ultimately affected the quality and potential efficacy of their equity plans.

Carver: "They want to make change, but they don't want to make waves."

Despite having more DEI efforts underway than Glory or Jefferson before 2020, Carver's administration struggled to figure out how to capitalize on this prior work as they navigated the disruption of 2020. Over the summer of 2020, several teachers and administrators who had previously been involved in DEI work gathered together to try to make a plan for the school year. Ms. Trevor (the Director of Special Education) and Dr. Gold (the Assistant Superintendent) were the key administrators involved in this effort, though several key teachers, such as Maria, who had previously spearheaded much of the district's DEI work, and community members played a substantial role.

As Ms. Trevor explained in a school board meeting, "one day we had a conversation sharing some things about some inequities in the district" which led to a decision to form "a committee and an equity plan." Once they reached this decision, they invited those key teachers and community members to help design the committee. One parent and current school board member (elected Fall 2021) described it to me in the following way: "late summer post George

Floyd I was invited to participate on the taskforce. Maria and a few others we kind of came together and really helped to write the charter and organize around creating a taskforce." This parent was one of around 10 people who agreed to speak with me because Maria, an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher who was extremely active in Carver's DEI efforts, asked them to. Each of "Maria's angels," as they have self-described to me in the past, saw 2020 as an opportunity to formalize some of the DEI work they had already been doing and perhaps get more credit, resources, and support for their work. With this in mind, they worked with Dr. Gold and Ms. Trevor to draft the charter for the Equity Taskforce. Then, at the beginning of the school year, they opened up the Taskforce to anyone who wished to participate. Dr. Gold and Ms. Trevor then set out to sort the volunteers into subcommittees, one for each domain of equity the district was trying to examine: curriculum and instruction, hiring, policy and procedures, professional development, community engagement, and disproportionality. Without much direction, the subcommittees began scheduling and having meetings, working toward a draft of a plan that would be presented to the full committee in March 2021.

The issues with the Taskforce began almost as soon as it started. Members felt there was little direction, and there was some frustration that the district had simultaneously begun this taskforce and attempted to implement a DEI-related curricular change. I joined the Taskforce as a member of the Curriculum and Instruction (C&I) team, and through my participant observation, I was able to witness how the Taskforce came together and then fell apart. The C&I team met every month from September to March and constructed a plan that focused on two areas: diversifying school libraries and making sure there were times built into the school day for teachers to make use of these newly diverse texts. Because of my previous research with the district, I was not surprised that the focus was on representative diversity. Even though

diversifying school libraries was a task Carver had talked about taking on back in 2019, this was still the upper limit of their curricular intervention for equity's sake. In my insider-outsider role, I took on a leadership role in the committee—a sort of ombudsperson role meant to help navigate any disputes. In the end, there really were not many disputes, but I did summarize what different individuals were contributing to help keep the conversations on track. By March, we had a plan which was presented to the full committee, and then I never heard anything from the Taskforce again. This illustrated the disorganization of the Taskforce—even people who had dedicated time to involvement in the project were ultimately left out of the process of deciding on the district's next steps.

Despite the silence from the Taskforce, other DEI efforts were unfolding at Carver at the same time. First, the school board was working on passing the 832 Educational Equity policy which they did on March 1, 2021, just weeks before the meeting in which the Taskforce presented its plans. This policy has some overlap with the Taskforce but includes a focus on "cultural proficiency" and "data" not explicitly mentioned in the Taskforce. This policy was announced and voted on at school board meetings, without much mention of how it related (or did not relate) to the Taskforce's work. Additionally, the administration decided to teach *Stamped* in a one-book program for the school, replacing the Give Voice initiative they had begun a few years before. Unlike the Give Voice initiative, teachers were not trained or prepared to teach *Stamped.* One teacher described the situation in the following way:

> To speak frankly, there is tendency in central admin to do things that are very trendy or that seem "super cool" or "super woke" and there's not a whole lot of thought on implementation. So with the roll out of *Stamped*… I think that was a very short sighted, selfish move, to throw that onto teachers… Had it been rolled out in person, slowly, with time put into the front of the roll out I think it would have gone a lot differently. But the way it happened is that central admin, like, saw the tar and feathers coming and they went "here's our solution, here's what we're doing, community, here's what's going to be the great PR for us." So they bought the books, pushed them out, and never really stopped to

> have a meaningful conversation about it first. We as a staff needed to be given those books for a staff study over the course of a year, and had speakers talk to us about how we talk to students and their parents about this book. So things like *Stamped* we ended up spending time putting out fires instead of actually pushing the conversation forward.

There is a lot going on in this quote. First, this teacher believed that the administration decided to push *Stamped* as a "PR" move because it was the "super woke" thing to do. Then, she emphasized that the right way to teach a book like this involves a *lot* of front-end work, so teachers would be prepared to explore this material with students and explain the choice to their parents. Additionally, this teacher emphasized something important: that the district administrators made this decision unilaterally, without consulting the community or the teachers. Rather than simply making the Taskforce's work more public, they chose to split their attention in these various ways, and neither ended up going very well.

While much of the reaction to *Stamped* came from Republican parents and had to do with the "critical race theory" backlash that I will discuss in the next chapter, there were other issues with adding this book to the curriculum without much forethought. The most poignant example here was that during a class discussion of the book, a white high school social studies teacher who was reading from the book read the N-word out loud. Rather than offer much of an apology, the superintendent defended the teacher in the next school board meeting, stating, "the teacher is not a racist, it's not a fair claim. It's not appropriate. We've dealt with the staff and addressed with the staff on this issue. This was not a matter of racism." Once again, the district was defensive, rather than explaining that it was a mistake that could *only* have to do with racism. In a moment like this, the teacher I quoted above seemed completely prescient: Had the district taken its time to unroll a one-book initiative around *Stamped,* teachers could have received enough training to avoid racist pitfalls and administrators could have received enough training to admit racist mistakes rather than continue to go on the defensive.

Thus, directly after the shock of Floyd's murder, Carver did three things: began an Equity Taskforce, taught *Stamped* in a one-book program, and passed their 832 Equity Policy. This split focus could be attributed to organizational chaos (unsurprising amidst COVID-19) or even a true desire to cover a lot of DEI ground at once. However, many of the teachers and parents originally involved with the Taskforce ended the 2020–2021 school year feeling frustrated, and they became even *more* frustrated when they learned the Taskforce was going to be entirely reorganized so that Dr. Gold would be in charge with limited input from the community. One teacher explained her experience on the Taskforce in the following way:

> I participated in the committee. I didn't feel like we made a whole lot of progress. It felt like it was rushed, thrown together… I felt like there was—not just from the board members—some admin as well who would push back and say 'it's covered' [re: their suggestions]. It was an hour every other week, I don't mind a big commitment if we're making progress but we're not making progress.

This teacher was frustrated that she felt like her time was being wasted. DEI was important to her, but if the subcommittee's ideas were not taken seriously, she did not really see the point in continuing. Another teacher expressed more severe disappointment with how the Taskforce turned out, saying,

> I think it's disappointing. With such a diverse population, you have a real opportunity to make inroads in many ways but this process overall was just not well done. I think there's a lot of things contributing to that, one is the pandemic, people have so much on their plate. When you're not seeing progress it's like f**k it, there's so many other things to be doing. It really hindered any future efforts for DEI work because people with the biggest buy in are disenchanted.

This teacher reiterated what the first teacher said—that it just was not worth the effort because there was no progress—and took it one step further to show concern about how this failed effort might make it more difficult to find buy-in for future DEI efforts.

In addition to these general frustrations with the Taskforce, there were two main issues that arose for interviewees. First, they were very frustrated that Dr. Gold hired a DEI consultant

in Fall 2021 without consulting the Taskforce at all. This made taskforce members feel shut out of the decision-making process. Second, there were concerns that despite the fact that the Taskforce was open to everyone, it was majority white, and administrators resisted the idea of having a town hall for people to come and share their experiences in the district. One teacher explained,

> We were really, really excited when they developed this equity taskforce and it started off well… I thought that the committee did a lot of good work. I thought we had a lot of good conversations. The problem was, it was a bunch of white ladies sitting on these subcommittees, trying to establish what the problems were that we wanted to fix. We don't really know what the problems are because we're white ladies. I might know some of them but I'm not experiencing this stuff. I would have wanted to do town hall kinds of things but I just think that the reason they would never do that is that they just fear losing control and they can't put that aside. It might be slightly uncomfortable, because people are going to tell you things we're not doing well, but it's the truth and they seem to equate that with lawlessness or something which in and of itself is kind of racist to be honest. We didn't start from a place where we dug down deep and made everybody feel like they could contribute.

Here, she recognized that "a bunch of white ladies" should not be in charge of determining either the *problem to be solved* or the solution.

Ultimately, despite entering 2020 with significant DEI infrastructure, Carver took on too much all at once and did not have the leadership capacity to effectively manage these various projects. Rather than fully committing to one approach to DEI efforts, Carver administrators dipped their toes in different ideas but did not completely execute any one of them. At the time of writing, they are still working with their new consultant to devise yet another DEI plan. In a major loss for the district, Maria, who started Carver's equity work, has quit working on these initiatives. As she said, she continues to "love the kids and hate the system." As one parent explained,

> they're [administration] not really clear on how to get there [an equitable school], or not really willing to give up the power or try some of the things that we're bringing around. They get to some point where they're not willing to do things… or they surround

themselves with people who don't encourage them to do what they should do. Additionally, teachers expressed that while the administrators clearly wanted the credit for DEI work, the work was not cohesive, and they remained far too concerned with the *liability*—how white parents and faculty would react. One teacher said, "So they wanted to put this stuff together but not in a cohesive way… They want to make big changes but they don't really want to make big waves." Here, Carver dealt with the twin disruptions of COVID-19 and Floyd's murder by rushing to maintain institutional legitimacy through an equity taskforce. Even though the disruptions opened the door for change, the district's concerns about maintaining their status as a DEI leader led them to create an equity taskforce without taking the time needed to make sure this taskforce would be effective. Additionally, administrators' tight grip on the district's DEI work did not allow for the distributed leadership that might have allowed for more success.

Jefferson: "Give her space and let her hopefully do good things."

Dr. Bates was one of my first interviewees at Jefferson back in November 2019. We met at a Barnes and Nobles' Starbucks cafe a few towns over from the district so that we could speak candidly without having to worry that she would be overheard. It was a wise decision because she had a *lot* to say about equity at Jefferson, most of which would not have gone over well with the higher ups of the district. At the time, she was the high school vice principal, had just been promoted into that role a few months prior, and she had tons of ideas for how the district should improve its DEI work. Dr. Bates was one of very few Black employees at Jefferson and the only Black administrator. She was working on her dissertation about equity in the district, measuring sense of belonging and social emotional skills as they differed by race and class. Therefore, in July 2020, when I heard she had been appointed to a newly created DEI administrator role at the district level, I was thrilled for her and not surprised. I was concerned, though, about the

enormity of the work being put on her shoulders, and this concern turned out to be warranted.

In Summer 2020, I also spoke with another Black teacher at Jefferson, who worked at one of the elementary schools. He was also passionate about DEI work and was both excited and nervous that Dr. Bates had been given this new role. He had not worked with her before and so while he was hopeful, he was also concerned. He told me the following:

> I'm going to give her space and let her hopefully do good things. And I just hope that it doesn't turn into a political shield for the district to say that we have this new role and not really have any action.

Once again, his concern was prescient—the district did indeed allocate all DEI responsibility to Dr. Bates and expected her to bear the brunt of the inevitable backlash to DEI work in the district.

Dr. Bates took a thorough approach to the work. Unlike at Carver, where they decided on equity areas to focus on right from the beginning, Dr. Bates focused first on conducting an "equity audit" of the district. While this was certainly an *action* the district took in the name of DEI, it was focused on collecting more information rather than making concrete plans. As the audit was ongoing, Dr. Bates was called upon to present on the district's DEI work at several school board meetings. She explained the initiative in the following way:

> The equity vision statement has the belief statements cover, essentially, all of those parts of the child's education. So it's talking about developing supportive relationships, feelings of belonging are all students as groups that you kind of alluded to all types of student groups are listed in Division statement, and then talking about opportunity and access for the for academic, rigorous courses. So that talks about enrollment in different programs, culturally relevant curriculum. So as a part of the audit that we're working through, we're kind of as I'm going to be assessing and pulling together this data that will be presented later this year. So we could take targeted goals to address where we find those gaps and inequities. I can tell you that a curriculum review and audit is going to be part of that process. But right now I'm in a information and data gathering phase. This is addressing the belief statements are addressing diversifying our faculty and staff is talked about is talking about supportive relationship between family and school… I'm going to share at a later public action meeting the results, the data results in summary of the audit, I've been conducting. And then I'll put forth some recommendations of how to proceed

> in order to try to bridge some of those gaps that are being identified for the audit. This is kind of the driver to say this is where we want to go. And this is where we want to be in terms of equity as a district as we as we target our action steps.

Here Dr. Bates was really explicitly explaining both the purpose and the nature of the equity audit. She explained that it was not *just* about equalizing outcomes but was also importantly about making sure all students felt comfortable and supported at Jefferson's schools.

As the year stretched onward, I also observed several meetings of Jefferson's curriculum committee, in which they had in-depth discussions about making curriculum more diverse. This was true, of course, for English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum but also for subject areas like science. The curriculum committee emphasized how important it was for all students to see themselves represented in science materials in order to give everyone the opportunity to imagine a future in science or math. This, of course, is the power and importance of representational diversity—without mirrors, it is hard for children to imagine themselves filling particular societal roles and without windows, it is impossible for children to show empathy and understanding to people in different cultural or demographic groups than themselves. One other administrator summarized it well, saying, "students need to see themselves in positive roles in the various literatures and windows so they can learn about the many different cultures that are part of our world."[12] Once again, though, Dr. Bates was expected to bear the burden of *all* of this work. Rather than continuing the discussion of culturally responsive or relevant pedagogy, the assistant superintendent in charge of curriculum said the following: "There's so much to culturally responsive teaching and I encourage Dr. Bates in who I know is on here to chime in as well." At that point, Dr. Bates took over the discussion, explaining why culturally responsive teaching was

[12] "Mirrors and Windows" has become commonplace language in discussions about diverse curricula in schools. The concept originated with Emily Styles in 1988.

important for all students. Here, despite the shock of Floyd's murder opening the door for more change, the conversations about curriculum were still solely focused on representational diversity. Despite noting that "there's so much to culturally responsive teaching," ultimately these initiatives did not touch on the *other* aspects of the practice, like the importance of developing critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings 1995).

These conversations continued at the curriculum meetings and at the school board meetings, with Dr. Bates presenting straightforward, factual information about DEI efforts. She was often lambasted, sometimes violently, by Jefferson's parents. Eventually, in April 2021, she presented the results of the equity audit. This audit focused on descriptive quantitative data in four areas: achievement gap (academic outcomes), discipline gap, opportunity gap (access to advanced courses), and sense of belonging gap. In fact, this equity audit data doubled as part of Dr. Bates' dissertation work. The document also included definitions, useful infographics from the state about equity in schools, and their six strategic goal areas: institutional practices, culturally relevant instruction, inclusive school climate, learning culture and professional development, data-focus, and workforce diversity. As she explained this, she asserted that they were aiming not for *equal* outcomes, but for *equitable* outcomes. By this she was referring to representational diversity in advanced courses and to proportional numbers in academic outcomes and discipline. I will note here that this equity audit was *still* operating within the same diversity framework, with the exception of the data around "sense of belonging." Once again, despite this straightforward, quantitative data, she received immense pushback from parents who believed that the school already had equal opportunity and should not then be trying to make outcomes more equitable.

As she bore these critiques, Dr. Bates tried to emphasize the importance of this work. At

one school board meeting, she explained,

> Right, so this, is beyond, this is kind of a nice thing to do. This is more than that. This is really about when you're talking about fostering positive identity development. What happens to a child when you don't foster positive identity development? What happens to that child and that child grows up into a young adult? How are their lives impacted if they don't have an education where they actually have mirrors?

She emphasized that this was about identity development for *all* students, *not* about some kind of politically or ideologically motivated curriculum change. She continued, explaining culturally responsive teaching,

> So when we talk about culturally responsive teaching, we were talking about just good teaching with a with a focus on that the students sitting in front of us are diverse. So if the materials and the examples that we use are not diverse, then we're not giving all of our students an opportunity to connect and you know, make the connection between personal experiences, personal culture and so forth with the materials that we're giving them.

Despite the fact that Dr. Bates focused on the data and made sure her presentations were driven by objective numbers and not subjective ideals, she still ended up coping with enormous backlash from parents. Parents demanded her resignation and threatened her. Other administrators did come to her defense, but despite this, the equity work in the district has stalled. The audit came out in Spring 2021, and that was the last publicly presented DEI plan or information. In this case, the burden of the work was placed too squarely on the shoulders of one administrator, who then became a convenient scapegoat for angry parents. All of this together stalled the equity work in the district. Although the set-up of DEI work at Jefferson was very different than at Carver, both districts suffered from similar problems. In order to respond to the disruption of the moment, Jefferson placed the responsibility for DEI work on the shoulders of one administrator, rather than distributing the responsibility among various district stakeholders. Additionally, this administrator focused on collecting information about equity rather than actively trying to make concrete plans.

Glory: Slow and steady community work.

As I foreshadowed in the introduction, Glory's DEI efforts were most successful, in that they resulted in concrete, action-oriented plans. Glory took a different approach than either Carver or Jefferson. Rather than jumping head-first into divergent equity initiatives or placing the burden on one administrator, Glory administrators both relied on community support and chose to take their time developing a plan, despite the external pressure to act. This is not to say that Glory was without its problems—just as Carver and Jefferson should not be interpreted as wholly dysfunctional efforts. However, because of a strong community/parent support infrastructure combined with patient administrators, they were able to craft an equity plan and 832 policy that reflected the needs of their community.

Assisting Glory in its DEI efforts was the Multicultural Parents Association (MPA), a parent group run by three Black parents in the district, which originated in the years following Trump's election. Prior to COVID-19, the group hosted in-person gatherings for community members, ranging from informational teach-in sessions, to book groups, to active support for new members of the community. Following the shocks in 2020, the MPA kicked into gear, hosting reading groups to discuss texts like *How to Be an Antiracist* and *White Fragility,* as well as novels by contemporary Black writers like Brit Bennett. One of the leaders of the group was an academic who taught at a local university, and she tended to take charge of these teach-ins and book groups. Additionally, she offered sessions on critical race theory, mass incarceration, and policing. These sessions targeted *all parents* and were widely attended by both Black and white parents in the district.

I spoke with two white mothers in the district who expressed their gratitude for the MPA's labor. One explained,

> I would say the MPA folks [do the most DEI work in the district], watching them in action, they are very passionate, thoughtful people, and diverse, not just Black family members, but Hispanic, Asian, and some Jews, some people are very academic, so they do research and this is important to them.

Throughout the conversation, this parent emphasized that the diversity and welcoming nature of the group helped her feel plugged into the DEI efforts in the community. Another white parent explained the following:

> I'm white if you hadn't noticed, and like many white people the events of George Floyd… it's like the first time I ever heard about these injustices. So I've kind of poured myself into schooling my ignorant ass on learning history, real history. I'm new to the MPA group and it's intimidating. I cried every single meeting at the beginning, now I don't feel the need to cry anymore.

Again, the MPA appeared to be a "safe space" for parents at all stages of their equity journeys. This group took on the responsibility of communicating the importance of DEI to Glory's families. As this second parent told me, "I'm just learning about the politics of the district. it seems to me, and I could be wrong, but it would behoove the school district to have a good relationship with the MPA people." Indeed it *did* behoove Glory to have a good relationship with the MPA, and they were well aware of this, carving out time at school board meetings for the MPA to announce its schedule and provide DEI updates and consulting the MPA leaders on its equity plans.

These plans, as I have mentioned, unfolded more slowly than in the other two case study districts. And in the summer of 2020, some community members were still very frustrated with the district. One Black elementary school teacher emphasized,

> You're dealing with the facade of what we want to say we are versus the reality of who we are…. So I can't see how because that in order for that to happen, that's going to take a great shift. And I mean a shift in culture, that's going to take equity when it comes to everything that they're doing. I just don't think Glory is willing to be that uncomfortable.

He went on to explain that as the only Black teacher at the elementary school, he took on a *lot* of

emotional labor regarding DEI work, especially in dealing with white teachers teaching Black students. He expressed not wanting to be a token but simultaneously feeling strongly about supporting all the school's Black students. He believed the only way to relieve this immense burden was to hire a more diverse teaching staff. On the other hand, white teachers were also skeptical of the district, feeling kind of "lost at sea" with regards to how to handle DEI issues. One teacher explained,

> I think people are really, especially right now looking for rules. And there just aren't rules. Like, you know, there isn't like a firm set of, if you follow these rules, you, you know, you're not racist, or you know, and it's just really, really hard to kind of figure it out.

She believed the district should be guiding her more strongly so that she could avoid being seen as racist in this changing climate.

Despite these frustrations with the district, by September 2020, then-superintendent Dr. Harmon still laid out her slow and steady plan. She explained,

> we have just established an equity team to take a look at these issues within our district. This follows up on the work we've been doing in our equitable practices committee meetings for the past three years, but in a little bit more of a data driven way. And so what we have identified are some of the areas, such as discipline data, our special ed data, our gifted data, access into higher level classes, data, and so forth, performance data of our students attendance data. And what we have done is we have solicited a team of volunteers throughout the district… So that's the vehicle that we are going to us in the district to be able to confront some of those realities, and hopefully try to come up with some actionable ways of addressing those issues.

Much like Dr. Bates, Dr. Harmon laid out her plan for the community, carefully answering community questions about the district's DEI plans. It is also interesting to note that at this stage of the planning process, Glory's focus was still very much on the numbers, the representational diversity. Another parent asked if they were considering an outside organization for an equity audit, and Dr. Harmon gave a long answer, culminating in:

> [pre-COVID-19] we had begun the conversations about perhaps having some type of an

> equity audit with outside participants, whether it was individuals from other school districts coming into our district as well. So hopefully moving forward, that's something that we can actually have occur in our district, once we're back into, obviously, post pandemic days, and we can invite people into the district.

Here, Dr. Harmon takes the community member's suggestion seriously, and while she does not promise an equity audit, she explains their decision-making and remains open to the idea. Ultimately, they did hire a consulting team to help with their data collection and analysis but not until much later that year.

This continued through the winter of 2021, as the equity team slowly collected both qualitative and quantitative data. Despite not pushing new equity initiatives that fall, the district invited the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) youth group in the area to put on a Black History Month presentation. Following their presentation, administrators decided that it was important to conduct student focus groups in order to "listen to student voices," saying, "we need to dig a little deeper. After that exercise with our faculty we started to think about well how can we really get an understanding of what our students experiences are and so we decided to construct focus groups." Once again, this demonstrates that the district really took stakeholder opinions and ideas seriously, from parents to students.

While Glory had communicated with families directly after Floyd's murder, it was not until 18 months later that Glory sent the following message to its families:

> During 2021 our Equity Team has been completing a review of multiple data sets in an effort to develop an action plan for continued improvement in our service to all students and families in the district. We have brought in a team from UPenn who will be conducting observations in our schools and facilitating discussions with anyone interested over the next week. Families are invited to join any of the following virtual or in-person sessions to meet with the UPenn team. District administration will not be present at these meetings, and will receive a summary report from the UPenn team once their analysis is concluded. We hope you can join them.

While Glory's administrators had communicated with families directly following Floyd's

murder, this was the first official update on DEI efforts. Once again, they took their time to ensure they were collecting a solid amount of data before proceeding with a plan. Dr. Thompson—the former assistant superintendent who took over as superintendent after Dr. Harmon retired in 2021—explained it to me this way:

> first we were going to gather quantitative data in our priority areas around those 6 goals, and then we were going to hire an outside research team to conduct a qualitative study that would involve feedback and input from students, family, community, staff, administrators, etc, all aspects of community. And so this fall, we gathered the quantitative data and reviewed the datasets with the equity team, and established findings based on findings. And then our research team from UPenn spent five days in early November on campus meeting with students, staff, etc around four core questions. And then the research team brought findings to the equity team in an afterschool session. So we've been meeting monthly to complete quantitative and qualitative studies in order to establish our action plan. So over the break, we drafted the equity action plan which includes the findings and the action steps we're proposing for the next three years.

They ultimately presented their plan at the January 2022 school board meeting. Rather than a focus on representational diversity (though those elements were still there), they were focused on creating "a community of caring." The plan included many of the same aspects of equity work as Carver and Jefferson but went beyond to display a deeper level of community integration and care. For example, they included plans to create a parent ambassador program to increase community involvement in the school. They also focused on student wellness beyond the numbers. Additionally, they committed to using community feedback as well as a self-check by the administration to evaluate the program. By waiting, and relying on their community, they were able to present a cohesive DEI plan that extended beyond a focus on representational diversity.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Nature of the DEI Initiatives and Racial Ideology

As I demonstrated above, there were significant differences in how the districts went

about trying to implement DEI initiatives between 2020–2021. However, despite these major differences, I argue that they were still operating under their racial ideology focused on diversity. The biggest argument *against* this claim is that districts' institutional commitments broadened to include a specifically articulated fight against anti-Black racism, rather than either "happy talk" diversity celebrations or vaguer descriptions of disproportionality in academic outcomes by race or class. However, despite the fact that many districts signed the resolution provided by the PBSA, the *actual initiatives* put in place by the districts were not substantively or ideologically all that different from the initiatives they were working on before 2020.

Before 2020, Glory, Jefferson, and Carver all had both subtractive and additive DEI-related policies designed to make both academic outcomes and advanced course taking more equitable. In chapter three, I argued that these policies, along with the districts' shared focus on diversifying curricular texts, were evidence that DEI initiatives were conceptualized within a diversity framework. Despite the resolutions and communications to families in the immediate aftermath of Floyd's murder, which did indeed show a broadening of their commitment to address racism, the new and emboldened initiatives post-2020 were still conceptualized within that same diversity framework, with some important exceptions. At Carver, for example, the six areas of DEI work included diversifying staff, diversifying curriculum, fixing disproportionality in the number of students of color taking advanced courses and being disciplined, shifting policies to further that goal, and increasing DEI-related professional development sessions for teachers. Jefferson and Glory similarly focused on diversifying staff and curriculum and were also concerned about those same disproportionalities. The one area where these new DEI initiatives deviated from that same focus on representational diversity was in terms of community engagement and school climate. Both Glory and Jefferson discussed improving

school climate so Black students would feel welcome and safe. All three districts discussed community engagement. These goals are more focused on *people* than numbers, at least in theory. However, as is evidenced by the way both teachers and parents talked about Carver, it is clear that they were not looking to truly involve parents—or at least Black parents—in decision-making around DEI work. At Jefferson, they included five parents in the equity audit, but beyond that, the work still seemed to be completely within Dr. Bates' domain. Glory, however, took a different route, collecting qualitative and quantitative data from parents, teachers, and students and actually waiting to devise an equity plan until they could effectively analyze that data. As a result, Glory's most recent equity plan (as of January 2022) has a broader focus than representational diversity. It takes those same ideas and builds on them to include a dedication to community care. For example, in addition to ensuring that the curriculum becomes more diverse, they are also "supporting conversations in the classroom that help students to be prepared for difficult conversations around equity." In addition to recruiting and retaining faculty of color, the district also discussed creating a feedback system for parents and creating a parent ambassador program to help bring more parents into school functions. Rather than being rooted in representational diversity, Glory's new plan is, as they say, "rooted in care."

Ultimately, this analysis can only go so far, as these plans are all new and cannot yet be evaluated for efficacy. However, it is clear from this data that giving parents, students, and teachers the opportunity to be part of *designating the problems to be solved,* as well as inviting them to help devise solutions, has the power to create DEI initiatives more expansive than those focused on representational diversity. Thus, while that focus is still prominent across the districts, Glory's relationship with its community members helped the district think more broadly about what equity means for their district. While their dominant racial ideology might still be one

focused on diversity, by listening to community members and collectively designating both equity problems and solutions, their DEI work was pushed beyond that framework.

Organizational Differences, Institutional Pressures, and Coupling

At the beginning of this chapter, I explained that the twin crises of Covid-19 and Floyd's murder constituted quite a "shock" or disruption to school districts. I then demonstrated how this shock put DEI concerns at the forefront of school districts' concerns, even amid a pandemic. How, though, did these districts respond to this shock, which demanded that they begin work they perceived they had already begun? While overall, I find that the DEI Doctrine absorbed these shocks and was still districts' blueprint for interpreting inequality, by giving descriptions of how each case study district reacted to the disruptions of 2020, I hoped to demonstrate the different ways organizations might respond to such a shock to their institutional field.

First, Carver took on too much too fast and did so in a chaotic non-cohesive manner. Teachers emphasized that they slapped lots of DEI efforts together very quickly, including a one-book reading of *Stamped* that one teacher argued was selected as "good PR." This might be true, and it raises one of the core questions I had about Carver's reaction to 2020: why did they try to do so many new things instead of publicizing their ongoing work? The answer, I argue, has to do with institutional pressure to remain legitimate. Carver as a district, and Dr. Gold in particular, had developed a strong identity related to their DEI work before 2020. In my interview with Dr. Gold in 2019, she spoke passionately about equity work, as did many of the other administrators and teachers I interviewed. I postulate that due to this identity, they felt the need to do more than other districts so that they would maintain their legitimacy as a leader in DEI work, not just in terms of institutional pressures on suburban schools, but also in terms of institutional pressures on *particularly equity-focused* suburban schools. This identity makes sense for Carver, as it is the

most racially and socioeconomically diverse district of the three. It was this very diversity that likely spurred their DEI work before 2020, and I believe it was their attachment to this identity that was their downfall in this case. While the literature on disruptions predicts that these events can open the door for change, institutional theory would predict that the pull to maintain institutional legitimacy might be just as strong. Carver overpromised on DEI efforts in order to maintain their status as a DEI leader, rather than taking the time to consider changing their approach. Perhaps if this disruption had been more constrained and not contained within the extant disruption of COVID-19, the district would have had the capacity to approach this differently.

Second, Jefferson used the shock almost as a "policy window" (Kingdon and Stano 1984) and created a new administrative position for Dr Bates, one that she had proposed many times before, but had never had the capital to push through. Like Dr. Gold, Dr. Bates had long been involved in equity work in the district, working her way from teacher to building administrator and now to district administrator. However, by creating this role, the district put immense pressure on Dr. Bates to spearhead all of the DEI work herself. She was an immensely competent researcher and administrator—in fact, the equity audit was a piece of her doctoral dissertation!—but it was simply too much work and *especially* too much political weight to lay on the shoulders of one person. This is especially true because Jefferson is the most *politically* diverse of the three districts. Jefferson has a large and loud contingent of Trump voters and anti-"critical race theory" parents (who I will discuss more in-depth in the next chapter) who quickly fixed their targets on Dr. Bates, who was particularly vulnerable as a Black, queer woman. Despite all her hard work, DEI initiatives stalled at Jefferson because she alone did not have the political capital to push them through.

Finally, Glory took a slow and steady approach and leaned heavily on its parent community rather than shutting them out. Glory's MPA bore much of the institutional pressure for equity work in 2020–2021, running monthly book clubs and talks for all parents and community members to attend. Rather than see the MPA as a threat, Glory's administration invited them in—giving them a time slot to present updates at school board meetings and enthusiastically advertising their programming. In addition, while the district allied with the MPA, this did not stop the MPA from pressuring and critiquing the district. On the contrary, Glory's slow approach allowed them to work with the community, as I described above. They collected much data from parents, students, and teachers before crafting an 832 policy and an equity plan. Perhaps Glory was most successful because their study body was mostly white and affluent, and therefore they did not have the pressures to "perform" diversity that Carver faced. Perhaps it was because the Republican contingent in Glory Township was considerably smaller (if not quieter).

Despite these alternate explanations, I believe, and the literature would predict, that it is the relationship with community members, and specifically, with the Black parents who run the MPA that allowed Glory to reach the point they have. Rather than "a bunch of white ladies sitting on these subcommittees," Glory listened to all community members, placing special focus on the most affected community members. Scholars of educational leadership have theorized about distributed leadership structure in schools, noting that in order to properly understand how leadership works within schools it is essential to look broadly at interactions at all levels of schools and districts (Spillane 2006; Mayrowetz 2008). Recently, Torres (2019) found that perception of distributed leadership correlated with teacher job satisfaction. It is plausible, then, that level of distributed leadership might also correlate with *community* satisfaction, as in this

case. Whereas Glory spread DEI work out among various stakeholders in the community, neither Carver nor Jefferson did.

In previous chapters, I have argued that DEI initiatives were not actually decoupled from everyday organizational life at school. That might remain true at Glory, where they did not overpromise between 2020–2021 but instead focused on a quality Black History Month curriculum and slowly preparing their equity plan. However, at Jefferson, where Dr. Bates was left to shoulder the burden alone, and at Carver, where they tried too many things at once, their ideals became performative in a way that they were not before 2020: Rather than focusing on implementable policy initiatives, both districts focused on how to *look* like they were committing to DEI. In this sense, the shock *did* really change their approach to equity work: In order to do what they thought was necessary to maintain institutional legitimacy, they had to decouple their district-level proclamations from what they could actually successfully accomplish in school. Whereas before 2020, DEI initiatives were implemented with fidelity, the efforts after 2020 were more "ceremony" or performance than actual substance (Meyer and Rowan 1977).

Chapter 6: Backlash to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives Post-2020

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In the previous chapter, I discussed the twin crises of COVID-19 and George Floyd's murder, both of which constituted significant disruptions to the school districts I studied. In the wake of Floyd's murder, institutions across the country felt the need to reaffirm their commitments to anti-racism, and school districts went about implementing DEI initiatives to this end, which they did in various ways. However, there is one final piece of the puzzle. Following the reinvigoration of support for the Black Lives Matter movement was a white backlash (Allen 2020)—a true moral panic (Reed 2015; Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2011)—orchestrated by Republican politicians. This moral panic coalesced around Critical Race Theory (CRT),[13] which Republicans expansively defined to include any curricular content about race, racism, or inequality. For example, recently all five Republican candidates in the Pennsylvania Senate Primary signed an anti-Critical Race Theory pledge that included the following text:

> Our young people should be taught to view one another not according to race or gender, but as individuals made in the image of G-d.[14] Teaching children to hate their country and each other is immoral and deeply harmful to our society and must be stopped. (1776 Action)

This false interpretation of school district diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives has played a major role in district decision making over the last two years. Before I continue on with this chapter, I note here that I am approaching this analysis from a left-of-center perspective, and it might very well be the case that Republicans would classify DEI initiatives as the true moral panic. While I hope to show empirically throughout this chapter that Republicans' CRT backlash

[13] Critical Race Theory is a theoretical tradition which originated in legal literature. It posits that racism exists on a structural level in the United States and that laws play a significant role in maintaining this structure (Bridges 2018). Republican activist Christopher Rufo capitalized on this term and used it to stand in for any curricular content addressing racism, and this trend spread across the Republican media machine.

[14] Omission of "o" my own.

did qualify as a moral panic, it is important to make my position known when discussing such a fraught subject.

As DEI efforts—many of which had already been ongoing for years—became more frequently and publicly discussed in the district, this backlash grew into an organized, irate grassroots political movement. Battle lines of this culture clash were political party lines. Suddenly, any utterance about race or inequality was seen as overtly political—and betraying public schools' commitment to political neutrality. School districts were faced with the end results of what was set in motion in the years following Trump. Removing all topics Republican parents disapproved of from the curriculum—in addition to ending DEI efforts which were, again, mainly focused on representational diversity—went against the districts' core commitments to reducing and educating about inequality. However, continuing *any form* of DEI work seemed to garner accusations of political indoctrination. In effect, the fomented moral panic made any response to Floyd's murder a problem for districts, yet *not* responding clashed with their institutional commitments.

In chapter four of this dissertation, I began to demonstrate how we ended up here, how Trump's campaign and election shifted norms around what "counted" as political in schools. In this chapter, I will address this topic in three ways. First, I will present descriptive data about this now-infamous culture clash, depicting how previously innocuous content became contentious. I will then explore the various aspects of the political identities (on the left and the right) emerging in this grassroots environment. Finally, I will return to the question of political neutrality in schools, exploring how districts navigated their role as the arena in which these political identities battled for cultural power.

Politics in the Schoolhouse

In addition to being organizations with their own set of institutional commitments, schools often end up as ideological battlegrounds. The way we choose to educate our children is indicative of the future we envision for society, so it makes sense that some of the most important debates of an ongoing culture war would take place within the school walls (Labaree 2008; Vergari 2000). In addition, while administrators run schools and teachers operate schools on the ground, these debates are most often had by parents (e.g., Binder 2002; Vergari 2000). Parents send their children to public school but still want to have a say in what they learn. While battlelines have been drawn across the schoolyard for various purposes (e.g., Binder 2002), sometimes, these are *political* battles, in the partisan sense, with Democrats on one side and Republicans on the other. At the same time, as I explored in chapter four, public schools themselves are expected to remain politically neutral, avoiding any semblance of party affiliation. In actuality, schools are more like a balance scale, measuring the weight of each side's might and tipping toward whichever seems heaviest. In chapter four, I demonstrated how norms about what counts as political shifted during Trump's campaign and after his election. In this chapter, I build on those findings by demonstrating how those shifting norms opened the door for the current culture clash.

One major distinction between the data from chapter four and the data I will discuss here is the level of parent involvement in debates over political neutrality. While pre-2020 parents occasionally complained to the school about content they deemed political, these tended to be one-off events that did not cause major disruption to school life. In this chapter I will show that beginning in Summer 2020, and ebbing and flowing ever since, parents have been more directly mobilized to organize against certain kinds of curricular content and policy initiatives in school. In order to discuss this phenomenon, I will draw on some ideas from political sociology.

This particular case offers an opportunity to examine the emergence of politics at the grassroots level—both the parents engaging in moral panic around CRT and the parents opposing them are actively participating in a political battle at the schoolhouse door. Political scientists have argued that American politics is more about social *identity* than specific policy concerns and that individuals regardless of party tend to choose politicians based on social identity rather than policy positions (Achen and Bartels 2017). Social identities can be leveraged for politics in various ways, at various levels, and within various institutional contexts, with political parties using these social identities to construct "us versus them" mentalities among their supporters (Achen and Bartels 2017). For example, Cramer (2016) demonstrates how a political identity focused on *resentment*—what she calls a rural consciousness—explains how Scott Walker gained power in Wisconsin, and Lacombe (2021) demonstrates how turning gun owners into an identity category allows the National Rifle Association (NRA) to continue to win support. In these two examples, it is clear that political campaigns or groups were able to capitalize on these social identities—as white members of the rural Midwest, or as gunowners—to garner their support. In this case, I argue that parents' racial ideologies—the lenses through which they understand how race and racism impact contemporary society—constitute distinct *social identities* that lead to the development of their politics around CRT and/or DEI in schools. This finding resonates with Yancy (2022), who argues that white people's perception of race is different in different places. While anti-DEI white parents operated under colorblind ideology (Bonilla-Silva 2010), pro-DEI white parents operated under diversity ideology. On the other hand, Black parents, who, in the districts I studied, advocated for their children out of wariness and concern, potentially operated under a different racial ideology entirely. However, I do not have enough data on Black parents to determine the contours of this ideology, only to

demonstrate how they responded to the DEI initiatives put forth by the districts which operated under diversity ideology. I argue that this newly developing politics among white parents demonstrates that as pro-DEI parents moved on to espouse "diversity ideology," anti-DEI parents continued to operate under colorblind ideology, weaponizing it to argue against any sort of racial justice work.

Moral Panic and the Culture War

In order to properly understand these developing political ideologies, though, it is important to consider the nature of events that spurred them on. While Democrat-leaning parents were propelled by the shock of Floyd's death and/or the need to advocate for their own children in school (Black parents mainly), Republican-leaning parents' outrage was actively *fomented* by the Republican party and political machine (Wallace-Wells 2021). Moral panics are times where

> the behavior of some of the members of a society is thought by others to be so problematic, the evil they do, or are thought to do, is felt to be so wounding to the substance and fabric of the body social that serious steps must be taken to control the behavior, punish the perpetrators, and repair the damage. (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2011:35)

While the CRT backlash has only rarely become physically violent, the many states passing related laws, and the sometimes violent speech of the parents engaging in the panic fit the definition.[15] A few paragraphs later, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2011:36) explain when moral panics tend to occur, saying,

> It is almost axiomatic in the literature that moral panics arise in troubled times, that researchers hypothesize a serious threat to the interests or values of the society as a whole or to segments of a society. What would cause the public, the press, politicians, social activists, and the police, to become seized with the idea that a relatively innocuous agent is dangerous and needful of control?

[15] For example, one parent, furious at the school board, screamed at the president, calling him "Benito Mussolini" to imply that he was a fascist leader for including curriculum about racism in the school.

It is hard to imagine a time in recent American history more befitting of this definition than 2020. Moral panics are defined by concern, hostility, consensus, volatility, and disproportion, often taking the form of "rumors of harm" (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2011:36). The CRT backlash certainly fits these criteria. First, this backlash occurred in a time of chaos—the pandemic was raging, George Floyd's murder had spurred extensive protests and calls for change, and the 2020 presidential election was looming. The backlash centered around "rumors of harm" to children—the argument put forth by many Republican politicians and activists was that what they called CRT was harming children. This argument was riddled with hostile misinformation. Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2011) also note that these panics are also often used toward furthering political goals, which fits the CRT timeline as well, since the backlash began as the 2020 presidential campaigns were in full swing. Additionally, the Republican party has moved farther to the right than the Democrats have moved to the left (Hacker and Pierson 2015), opening the door for clashes in signification: While Democrats, or parents whose positions on DEI align with Democrat politicians, might see certain elements of DEI as nonpartisan, Republicans, or parents whose positions on DEI align with Republican politicians, now further to the right, might no longer see it that way at all. Second, many Republicans already viewed COVID-19 restrictions as an attack on their freedom, propping the door even *further* open for powerful actors to create a frenzy (Haynes 2021).

Reed (2015) argues that powerful groups can capitalize on a moment ripe for moral panic by using strategies like synecdoche (where one thing stands in for a much larger idea) and metanarrative (the story people tell about the evident crisis). In this case, the Republican party latched onto the idea of CRT, using it as a synecdoche for a unified, indoctrinating, socialist, left-wing agenda they scared their constituents into believing was being enacted in public schools.

They constructed a metanarrative involving indoctrinated children being turned into activists and simultaneously being told that they are evil because they are white (Martell and Stevens 2020). For example, Jim Cox, a Pennsylvania state representative, explained on his website that CRT promotes an "inverted system of racism," and it can "undermine students' sense of self worth." The danger, he argues, is that "boys and white students may learn to believe any success they achieve in life is only due to undeserved preferential treatment they received based on their identity" and "girls and minority students may learn to believe no matter how hard they work, they will always be held back or incapable of succeeding based on their identity." He goes on to explain that he has co-sponsored a bill to prohibit districts from teaching "racist concepts like critical race theory." In closing, he notes that, "America must continue to work to heal the great wound of racism that too often divides our citizens. We can do that by continuing to focus on Dr. Martin Luther King's vision of advancing equality" (https://www.repjimcox.com/CRT). These comments demonstrate the way the Republican party has fomented a panic around CRT: They are misleading and cultivating "rumors of harm" to children.

Of course, on a deeper level, letting schools teach CRT *also* stands in for white people giving up their idea of America. Many of the lessons Republicans have slapped with the CRT label are history lessons that explore the dark truths of American racism. They view this as a rewriting of history that paints white people as evil—a rewriting of history that asks them to think critically about their own history and their own actions. On the other hand, the response from the left to George Floyd's murder and subsequent pushes to increase DEI work do *not* qualify as a moral panic. These are based in fact and are for the purpose of rectifying a documented and factual social problem—systemic racism. Much like Republican parents' disregard for scientific knowledge regarding COVID-19 protocols in schools, their response to

"CRT" was not based in fact, putting it squarely in the "moral panic" category.

In the sections that follow, I will first use one substantial vignette to demonstrate the dimensions of this culture clash. I will then briefly discuss teachers' views on the subject, describe Democrat parents' concerns, and then elaborate on the elements of the CRT moral panic. Finally, I will explore how the school districts chose to respond to these attacks in a way that ultimately pushed curricular content to the right overall.

DATA AND METHODS

For this chapter, I rely mainly on observations of 85 school board and equity committee meetings, with a few references to interview data throughout. As with chapter five, I was able to speak to more respondents from Carver in late 2020 and early 2021, along with a few from Glory and only three from Jefferson. Additionally, I observed the activity of six parent groups on Facebook, two from each district.

FINDINGS

On September 15, 2020, the Glory School District School Board meeting was in chaos. Parent after parent had complained about something that elementary school teachers had presented in their classes earlier that week, and Dr. Harmon had to address it. The content in question was a YouTube video of a reading of a picture book titled *Something Happened in Our Town: A Child's Story about Racial Injustice,* which was published in 2018. Glory had included the book in its curriculum for two years without issue. The book was written by Marianne Celano, Marietta Collins, and Ann Hazzard and was designed specifically to help young children understand the complex issue of police brutality. The book follows two children, one white and one Black, as they have a conversation with their parents about a police shooting in their town. The white family explains that some police can be biased against Black people and briefly

describes both slavery and the Jim Crow era to give some background on the issue, explaining that this is a "pattern." "Like the pattern on my blanket?" she asks, "yes," says her mother, "but this pattern is being nice to White people and mean to Black people. It's an unfair pattern." Notably, after hearing about racism in the past, the child asks, "did our family do those things?" Her parents answer her honestly, "Yes." The section concludes with the girl committing to be kind and try to start new patterns. On the other hand, when the Black family discusses the issue, they assure their son that it is legitimately scary and make sure to also explain that there are plenty of good cops out there. The section ends with his mother explaining, "you can change people's hearts by sticking up for someone who is not treated fairly." The boy responds, "Like how Malcolm [his brother] sticks up for me when kids tease me about my glasses?" "Just like that," his parents said." While certainly the text touches upon complex social issues, it offers a balanced perspective without unilaterally demonizing police officers.

However, some Glory parents did not see it this way at all. One white father spoke out at the school board meeting and said, "my son wasn't himself last night, he was crying. When I learned about the book, I was shocked, appalled. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I sent an email to the teacher. I'm a policeman and my son was being told I'm a murderer. This book is radical, biased, slanted, and flat out wrong." (Again, the book specifically says *not all cops* are bad.) Another white parent emphasized that her daughter cried all night after hearing the book read aloud. She elaborated on her anger in the following way: "I am all for promoting respect and standing up against racism, teaching values and ethics, but there has to be a way that it doesn't offend children… How is the material going to be shared with parents?" Here she claimed that she supported standing up against racism (though implicitly police violence does not qualify as racism). She also believed schools should check everything with parents first. She

went on, “It very conveniently slipped into the curriculum. This is an affront to the parents in the community, this isn’t math, this is something about morality and ethics and you’ve overstepped your place by taking on the role of the parent to talk about what’s going on in the world. They might think ‘oh my goodness, will people of a different skin tone than me be at risk?’” In the latter half of her comment, she qualified her original statement, which implied that it was appropriate for districts to “stand up against racism” and teach “values and ethics,” saying that it *wasn’t* appropriate for schools to cover current events that have to do with racism. Then, she emphasized that the fear her white child might feel for her Black schoolmates was unacceptable to her—her child’s innocence should be preserved at all costs.

On the other hand, parents and community members showed up to combat these views. One student member of the Youth National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) who was a Glory alum said the following, “Criticizing police brutality is not necessarily criticizing the police, it’s not an indictment on the police force, it’s an indictment of the people who abuse their power. Something *has* happened in this very town. I’ve been stopped while running, I’ve had friends be tased. The NAACP youth group is working to instill more African American history as part of the curriculum. And a reality of that is that there is violence, police brutality, etc. If you are scared to educate your children early, you either entirely fail them by not teaching them the nuance or you don’t prepare them for the reality we live in today.” He offered his own experience living in Glory as a young Black man and shared his group’s ongoing efforts to add critical history to the curriculum. A current Black student at Glory shared the following, “from the perspective of a Black student this is really important and kids aren’t too young to learn about it. Black families have to do this when kids are young, why shouldn’t everyone.” Parents stepped in as well. One white parent said the following: “there was a

comment earlier about children being scared. Well unfortunately the reality is their Black friends *are* in danger. My husband and I take the time to teach our son that he is in a position of privilege and not everyone has the same experience he does. We wish we could say everyone is treated equal, but that is negating people's experience. I commend the teachers who chose with courage to teach this and we are behind you." Another white parent shared the following: "We can't brush this under the rug, can't ignore this real trauma that is happening. I'm very supportive of speaking up for equality in this district, to have compassion. This shouldn't be an ethical dilemma." Here we see white parents who *wanted* their children to learn about racism and were trying to demonstrate their support for DEI work in the wake of Floyd's murder.

After all of this, Dr. Harmon apologized for allowing the teacher to share the video, despite the fact that she also emphasized at the meeting that *they had taught this book the prior year without incident.* Thus, while in the past this content was deemed acceptable, the manufactured backlash to supposed DEI efforts in the wake of Floyd's murder shifted the norms around what counted as political *even further* than they had shifted before. Now that these efforts were demanded by the left and demonized by the right, anti-DEI parents entered a period of demanding "parent rights" to decide what their children were taught in school. This particular demand was not salient in the districts before 2020. For another brief example, one teacher explained that in the past there had been "some pushback to some of the novels we were reading" and explained while these one- or two-off complaints "had always been somewhat of an issue," this "perfect timing and pendulum swinging" made the complaints take center stage. This fervor added complexity, of course, to school districts that felt a commitment to respond to inequality but were trying to stay politically neutral. In the next sections, I will describe the various aspects of these developing political ideologies and explore how they coalesce with

racial ideologies.

Joining the Movement and Understandable Wariness: Pro-DEI Parents

Parents who supported DEI issues spoke about these efforts in a few ways, although this in general was far rarer than the outcries from the parents who articulated the Republican view against CRT. Sometimes they were in support of the districts' DEI efforts, sometimes they argued that these DEI efforts did not go far enough, and finally sometimes they spoke out against ill-prepared or even reckless DEI efforts that could have the unintended consequence of further harming Black students. These various categories were racialized: While white parents were more likely to speak about their own personal journeys to better understand equity, offer support for the school's initiatives, and sometimes push for more, Black parents were more likely to critique districts' DEI efforts, either because they did not do enough or because they were actively harmful. Additionally, at Glory, Black parents ran the Multicultural Parents Group, which both advocated for DEI work in the district and led educational efforts to inform other community members about different aspects of structural racism.

Some white parents described feeling the call to support DEI work, and they wanted to push the school to do *more* in terms of teaching students about the history of racism in the country. For example, one Glory parent told me the following:

> I would like them to do a better job of teaching history accurately and talking about slavery from 1619 on. They could do more talking about American history and how Black and brown people have been living with so many hurdles and roadblocks… even though it's pretty blue there is certainly racism alive and well here, I would say, my husband being Jewish and not growing up here, there's not blatant antisemitism but people say things without thinking, like "he J*wed me down." There are probably also really strong pockets of racism here but they hide it well.

She packs a lot of meaning into this quote. She first expresses a desire for schools to address the history of racism in America and then goes on to explain that even though it is a relatively blue

area—meaning, most community members vote Democrat—she believes there is still racism that the school should play a role in combatting. She connects her family member's experience of antisemitism to a perception that racism is still a present issue in her community.

White parents in this first category also discussed organizing to attend school board meetings to ensure there was a vocal opposition to anti-DEI parents. One explained in a Facebook post,

> I have been traveling and taking some time off, but I want to continue to draw attention to the backlash to honest teaching of our country's history in K-12. IMO [in my opinion] we need to be prepared to attend SB [school board] meetings when they resume in person to balance out any of the irrational arguments that will be made against our efforts to be more diverse and inclusive in the district…. I am concerned that if/when such a narrative takes hold in Carver all of our children will suffer from not having access to the robust and representative curriculum they deserve and are entitled to. Hopefully members of this group and others will be present to reject the baseless narrative so that the business of the district can move forward.

Here, she used Facebook in an attempt to organize like-minded parents to attend school board meetings to present a defense against the "irrational arguments" of the right. She also emphasized that "all our children will suffer" without the DEI initiatives. This is important because she saw DEI initiatives as important for *all* students to succeed. This reflected the districts' shared position that educating about inequality is important to prepare students to succeed in a global society.

Another white parent in the same group called on the group to combat the CRT-panic. She explained,

> I saw a post the other day on one of the local pages from a woman who wanted to know how she could watch school board meetings so she could combat CRT and the social education that is racist in our schools. CRT the next empty signifier for those who just want to keep the status quo, and the people with the loudest mouths in the media ecosphere are more than happy to perpetuate this. I'm posting a couple good articles in the comments.

Here she clearly articulated what Reed (2015) would call *synecdoche* happening with CRT—it

was a stand-in for anything "those who want to keep the status quo" oppose—implying the heavily Republican anti-CRT messaging—and she also implored parents to fight it. This quote was from a Facebook group for Carver parents for DEI, which has the following mission: "This is a group exclusively for community members of Carver Township and School District, who value and will defend the diversity, equity, and inclusion of all people in our community."

Black parents who supported DEI efforts were often wary of the efficacy of their implementation. They also advocated for the district to do more to include them in their DEI planning. At one Carver school board meeting, a parent said the following: "Thank you from a parent of a student of color for teaching *Stamped*," showing support for this initiative. Another added, "Carver is not alone as it scrambles to formulate a long overdue DEl plan, one that is all inclusive, long range, and with measurable goals and quantifiable outcomes." She then went on to ask specific questions about the district's DEI planning process, inquiring about the details that were not publicly or collaboratively decided on. This parent showed empathy for the district even while calling the current expansion of DEI work "long overdue." Unspoken in this comment, of course, was the fact that if she had been included in the planning process, she would not have to have been asking these questions at a public school board meeting.

Another parent attempted to explain that DEI work goes beyond just race, while simultaneously explaining how addressing race and racism is connected to addressing any other structural issue. She said,

> Unfortunately, what I hear from opponents of DEI too often is the objection to DEI based on a lack of comfort in acknowledging America's greatest sin, racism, and the false notion that DEI is only about that. While a true addressing of DEI for all does include an account that race can/does play a role in education, that is not ALL that DEI is about. I don't get how people can be 100% for a single aspect of DEI (for example IEP [individualized education plan] supports) and could care less or be unsupportive of the others. Those people are part of the problem.

Here, she uses IEP supports as an analogy to race and racism, arguing that if individuals support special education, they should also support DEI in other areas as well. While it is unclear if this logic would convince anyone from the right, she provided the district with another way to combat protests of their DEI efforts. Even if the districts were not necessarily willing to defend their DEI efforts, this parent demonstrated one way they could approach this task.

In addition, Black parents brought up concerns with the implementation of DEI efforts. In discussing the botched implementation of the *Stamped* one book program, one parent said:

> There needs to be a distinction between help for teachers and help for students. Black students are continuing to be harmed. Please continue to listen to the people who live this every day, children need a safe space to feel empowered.

Here, she was concerned that while teachers might be receiving some support for teaching *Stamped* (which was not necessarily the case), the district needed to be focusing on how students, and Black students in particular, might handle both taking in the information in *Stamped* and coping with white classmates' and teachers' racism. Similarly, another parent asked, "How have you helped white teachers get in touch with their own feelings," in an effort to understand what the district was doing to prepare white teachers to be more effective educators for Black children. Additionally, while anti-DEI parents were more likely to elide DEI concerns with concerns about district response to COVID-19, one Multicultural Parents Association (MPA) member did step up to defend COVID-19 precautions, saying, "I support the masking rule because the virus has disproportionately impacted Black and brown children."

Additionally, the teachers that I spoke with after 2020 mirrored these categories. White teachers tended to discuss their "equity journeys," offer support for the districts' efforts, and show concern that they were not extensive enough. Black teachers and other teachers of color critiqued the district for not going far enough or for being reckless with their DEI work. While

my sample was certainly biased in that the teachers who tended to speak with me were generally on board with DEI initiatives, it is clear that teachers and parents on the left tend to line up in terms of their perspective on DEI. Additionally, parents on the left support DEI initiatives, which the districts *also* feel strongly about pursuing. All of this is to say, parents on the left—and especially white parents—conceptualized DEI initiatives through a similar racial ideology as teachers and administrators—one focused on diversity. For example, one white teacher expressed the following:

> I mean, our district is trying to make moves in that direction. They just started an equity task force that they're asking for teacher volunteers. I know I'm doing a lot of personal like reading and, and growth… You know, and I think I think that's my biggest push as, as a teacher, like obviously, as a human being, I want to be better, but also as a teacher, you know, because all these people with police brutality, like I can see like my students in their faces, you know, and there's never anything that I would want to personally be responsible for, for making a student feel less than because my implicit bias, whether it exists or not, which I'm sure it does, you know, but that's my job is to look into that. So I know a lot of teachers are trying to do, you know, the hard work themselves to be able to do better.

Here, this white teacher demonstrated that she was trying to learn more about DEI for herself, while still supporting and being active in the district's DEI work.

Black parents and Black teachers had a slightly different perspective. While they supported DEI initiatives that focused on representational diversity, they also pushed the district to do more and to do this work more cautiously and with concern for potential unintended consequences for Black students. One Black teacher at Jefferson told me that he had organized regular meetings for all six of the Black teachers in the district, to discuss the district's DEI work and figure out how to both support and hold them accountable. Another Black teacher at Glory described the immense pressure of being the only Black elementary school teacher, and one of only a few in the district:

> I just think they can do a better job at their hiring. They must do a better job of their

> hiring practices, because let's just say hypothetically, I leave the district today or tomorrow. Yeah, there's, there's a vacuum that needs to be filled in, but there's no guarantees that the district will see it as important. And I've been there for 13 years. And who's the next teacher to come and take my place? I don't want to be the token, I need to be the norm. So I think with hiring, they can do better… So this is what I mean… [when you see the few Black teachers] You [Black students] now know there's a support system where, that's not my teacher. But I know I can go talk to them, or I see their face. And I mean, we we jokingly call ourselves the Underground Railroad of Glory because all the parents of color, they come to us. So … when an incident comes up, there's not this rush [by the district] to fix it, to address it, to mend it…. And then when someone yells out something racially insensitive or racist in the moment, [white] teachers don't know how to handle it, so they don't. As we say, in an urban dictionary, they don't check it. And now you have students that are so angry, they don't know what to do. So they come back, the door's always open. But I have seventh, eighth graders that come back to me and say, "This is what happened. How do I handle it." and I have to go to be the in between to talk to the teacher.

Here, the teacher expressed his wish for more diverse hiring, elaborated on the difficulties for himself, other Black teachers, and Black students, and expressed his desire for the district to go beyond diversity-focused initiatives in their DEI work by addressing racist incidents more wholly.

Overall, "pro-DEI" parents communicated their stance in several different ways. Pro-DEI white parents emphasized the importance of DEI for all students and tried to mobilize to show up to school board meetings. They generally did not offer critiques of the districts' DEI efforts in school board meetings. Pro-DEI Black parents were supportive of some of the districts' initiatives, but this support was rightfully wary, as some of the plans were implemented in haphazard or harmful ways. These parents pressed the districts to commit to providing better resources for their children to process what they were learning. Finally, the teachers that I spoke with tended to mirror these parents, with white teachers expressing similar views about DEI work and Black teachers similarly expressing wariness and frustration with the districts.

Weaponized Colorblindness: Parents on the Right

There were several dimensions of the outrage parents who were anti-DEI expressed,

many of which resonated with Bonilla-Silva's (2010) colorblind ideology. In *Racism Without Racists*, Bonilla-Silva (2010) explains that colorblind racism consists of four tenets: abstract liberalism (embracing principles like opportunity but in an abstract way that does not account for the details of the circumstances); naturalization (saying things that stem from structural racism are just "natural" or normal); the biologization of culture (culture of poverty explanations for inequality); and minimization of racism (the belief that racism is mostly a problem of the past). Anti-DEI parents engage in abstract liberalism and in minimization of racism, and additionally, they weaponize their belief in colorblindness to label any *mention* of racism to be racist in and of itself. In all, these parents: mentioned colorblindness by name, called DEI work divisive, mentioned religious concerns, mentioned concerns about individual freedom, and elided concerns about DEI with concerns about COVID-19 precautions. Key, though, was their adamant and repeated assertion that they were against racism. One white parent of Black children made the following comment, which encapsulates many of these dimensions and demonstrates the internal logic of this identity:

> I don't want our district to adopt anything that is radical in either direction… I don't believe in oppression of any kind. I don't believe in CRT, I don't believe in masking—it's just not effective, it's proven, people applaud it but, you know, scientifically it doesn't work. I think that what I want most is to know exactly what my children are learning and be able to opt in or opt out of it. I don't want my kids to get jabbed with a vaccine at school without my permission, I don't want my kids to be taught that because of the color, the amount of melanin in their skin that they're victims, because they're not victims. I don't want them to be taught that I'm an oppressor because my melanin is, you know, all white. I don't want any divisiveness.

Here, she emphasized that her point of view was *not* radical, that she did not believe in racist ideas, that she believed that discussing oppression causes divisiveness, and that these concerns were all tied up with both her parental rights and her concerns over COVID-19 precautions. I present this quote in full up front because it is easy to dismiss these sorts of comments as outliers

and as unhinged. However, even though the comment might seem outlandish, it does hang together with some coherent internal logic, even if that internal logic is based on bigotry and lies. This internal logic is based on a colorblind racial ideology, but one that is weaponized to combat *any acknowledgement of racism* and inevitably results in calling any acknowledgement of racism the "real" racism. She emphasized that she believed CRT teaches that white students are oppressors and students of color are victims, vastly oversimplifying and misstating the logic of CRT and simultaneously making erroneous assumptions about the district's DEI efforts. She also elided concerns about CRT with concerns about COVID-19, arguing that masking was ineffective and expressing concerns about the district vaccinating her children without her permission. This latter concern was not based on any real school initiatives, but it *was* a rumor that had been circulating in right-wing media, like Breitbart.[16] Altogether, this quote is emblematic of the logic many of these parents used: emphasizing colorblindness, speaking against divisiveness, assuming that DEI efforts classify students as victims and oppressors, and eliding DEI concerns with concerns about COVID-19.

While my data cannot definitively say where these ideas came from, many of the ideas they drew on are easily located in both Republican media sources like Breitbart and politician's statements, including the one I quoted in the introduction to this chapter. Additionally, Dr. Thompson, superintendent of Glory, had her suspicions. She told me, "I can predict what's coming into my inbox based on what Tucker Carlson said the night before." By this, she meant that she believed these outraged right-wing parents were taking their cues from the Republican media machine—a set of television shows, podcasts, and other news outlets that peddle in

[16] For example, one article ran with the headline: "Los Angeles Public Schools Vaccinated Children without Parental Consent, Said Not to Tell."

misinformation, fear mongering, and outright lies. In the next few sections, I will highlight the separate aspects of this set of politics.

Anti-DEI parents' ideas were driven by a weaponized colorblind racial ideology. Bonilla-Silva (2010) discusses colorblind racism as elusive, but when these parents used the ideology's frames (mainly minimization of racism) to combat race-conscious DEI efforts, it became simultaneously fervent (they do not *avoid* talking about the subject) and incoherent (Bonilla-Silva 2010). While some of these dimensions do not literally mention being colorblind, others do. One tactic these parents fell back on quite often was to refer to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr in order to substantiate their concerns. For example, one Glory parent explained,

> it just occurred to me that this [DEI work] is an inversion of Martin Luther King's message that we should be colorblind. And we should be evaluating people based upon their deeds and words, and not upon the color of their skin.

Here, the parent inverts King's message to condemn teaching students about the history of racism in the United States. Similarly, another parent, in critiquing Jefferson's DEI effort said the following: "in Dr. Martin Luther King's own words, injustice anywhere is a threat to the justice everywhere. Your Equity Program has deep ties to far-left hate groups. How dare you bring that ideology into the public school system?" Again, this parent weaponized the cultural memory of King to try to argue against the DEI program in the school and classified the Southern Poverty Law Center, where the district had drawn some resources from, as a "far-left hate group." Another Jefferson parent outright described herself (and all Christians) as "colorblind believers in Jesus"—once again, emphasizing that they believed that acknowledging race or racism was inherently divisive and therefore wrong.

Along the same lines, many parents emphasized that they believed any form of DEI work (which they call CRT) promoted divisiveness. For example, one Carver parent said,

> [children] are being taught that they are either victims or victimizers. It creates a wedge between students, and it's divisive… I can't imagine walking around the halls of this school and people looking at each other and feeling guilty because of the color of their skin.

Here, this parent used the terms "victim or victimizers" and emphasized both that teaching divisiveness was wrong and that it was wrong to make white children feel "guilty" about their whiteness. Similarly, a Jefferson parent said, "This curriculum attempts to mold our children at a young age to believe that their skin color is all that matters, and that white children are bad and Black children are victims." Once again, they leveraged language about oppression and structural racism to argue that DEI-oriented curricula created division between children, rather than greater empathy and understanding about the world. Importantly, these parents identified DEI work as the "true racism" because acknowledging racism or race *at all* goes against colorblindness. For example, one parent said, "white [students] are condemned as being oppressors and another body of people [are defined] by their blackness… are irreparably oppressed. That, my friends, is racism and bigotry. How dare you try to fight racism with more racism?" While this particular comment is not entirely coherent, the meaning here is that once again, they believed that DEI work divided children into categories of "victim" and "oppressor" and that this was the true racism. Along these same lines, parents offered additional concerns about "demonizing" white people. For example, one Carver parent, in critiquing a list of DEI-related books, said the following:

> Not one book in the "white identity" category presents white people in a positive light. Here are just a few of the books, one called *White Rage*, [one called] *White Fragility*, and [one called] *White Trash*, all of which discuss the ideas of white supremacy and the idea that all white people are fundamentally racist.

Here, these parents went beyond what Bonilla-Silva (2010) describes to actively weaponize their belief in colorblindness to oppose any mention of race or racism.

In addition to claims that DEI efforts were the "true racism," some parents actively spoke out against efforts to improve access for all students, emphasizing that these initiatives were not fair or were even lowering expectations for students of color. These accusations resonated with Bonilla-Silva's (2010) abstract liberalism tenet because they relied on an abstract idea about available opportunities in the districts. One Carver father said the following:

> Any program further acknowledges its belief in the CRT dogma by its plan to level the playing field by taking resources already available to all from one group and giving more to another smaller group and calling it justice. The equity lens sees the students in the minority oppressed group as not being able to do the work to succeed and not able to perform scholastically as well as the supposed oppressors. This is the essence of racism.

Here, this parent was actively against "leveling the playing field" because he believed there was already a meritocracy and that any policies that tried to then *create* a meritocracy would then be unfair to the dominant group. Notably, he emphasized "taking resources already available to all from one group to another smaller group." If these resources were already available to all, they would not be moving from one group to a smaller group. His words give away his true meaning, which is that he was against the idea of taking any resources from white students to better support students of color. Another parent said,

> I hate watching my kids struggle. It's the worst thing for any parent. But every person has their set of hurdles they have to overcome. And what would life be like if you never got to experience victory? We are adamantly against racism. We feel each person regardless of color, culture, creed, religion, sexual orientation, or anything else should be treated equally. We also believe that every single person and especially every child should feel valued and accepted, and be given every opportunity and tool possible to succeed. It is because of the strong core beliefs and values that we oppose equity, and all its other names. We believe this new curriculum teaches and promotes racism and causes division. It puts people in groups, instead of being seen as individuals. It stops people from being able to work harder and get further and it robs everyone of the joy of overcoming and experiencing victory.

In this quote, this parent disagreed with the fundamental idea that policies designed to remove "hurdles" from students—exactly the kinds of access-oriented policies the districts were

implementing before 2020—would make school fairer. Instead, he argued that it "robs everyone" of the opportunity to overcome adversity—not acknowledging, of course, that some students have significantly more structural adversity to overcome than others. These two comments are distinct because they demonstrate that this group took issue not just with curricular *content* about racism, but also policies meant to make the school more equitable. Once again, this argument reflects one of Bonilla-Silva's (2003) key frames of colorblind racism—using abstract liberal ideas like equal opportunity to emphasize that racism does not exist. However, these parents took this one step further to assert that *it would be wrong* to try to level the playing field in any way.

In addition to arguing that DEI efforts were the "true racism," Republican parents also argued that DEI work was anti-American. One Carver parent said the following:

> While some of the books [being taught] are appropriate and celebrate different cultures and achievements, others pose a concern. There are books that are anti American, anti government, political, distort history, promote the ideologies of radical groups and demonize the white race.

This parent acknowledged that some of the books might be alright but then wanted many of the books taken off the list. She went on to say,

> They [these books] put forth biased political pronouncements not based on fact. This book, *One Person, No Vote,* uses partisan politics with respect to voter suppression, a history of it as well as today, suggesting that voter suppression is on the rise. Where are the books on patriotism? Our founding fathers, the American flag, books that celebrate our great country? America is not without its flaws, certainly, but it's a country that guarantees freedoms that no other place in the world does.

This particular quote demonstrates the shifting norms around what "counted" as political. *One Person, No Vote* is a text written by African American Studies Professor Carol Anderson, with co-author Tonya Bolden, meant to detail the history of voter suppression at a Young Adult reader level. However, this parent was portraying this academic text as biased and *un-American.*

Another parent at Glory explained that she knew that American history had its share of ugliness.

However, she explained,

> These are topics that most elementary and middle school students are not equipped to discuss. Our nation is not one that was founded on sinister ideas and practices, our nation, that is the envy of the world. It is a country that millions of people immigrate to.

She emphasized that she disagreed with the fundamental *story* of America as a country founded on "sinister ideas and practices," like slavery. This story was, to these parents, anti-American. Finally, and most succinctly, a Jefferson parent exclaimed, "You want them to believe that America is fundamentally evil."

Parents also emphasized that DEI efforts were anti-Christian. One parent, for example, shared the following:

> A lot of the issues being addressed tonight are intersectional [I believe she meant intersecting]. They affect all of us in some respect, and we back each other as one unified force. While I am respectful to all religions, I can only speak of my own Christianity. The tenets of Christianity are diametrically opposed to the tenets of critical race theory.

Another parent elaborated on this idea, saying,

> The answer CRT provides are very different than those Christianity offers. As colorblind believers in Jesus, we believe all humans are created as equals under G-d. My religion welcomes and brings together people from every ethnic group into one valued for their unique abilities and personalities. We do not divide by identity category which sews division and endless conflict.

Here, these parents explained that they viewed any discussion of categories as divisive. Thus, not only did they not *agree* with bringing up race and racism in school, they saw it as actually both anti-American and anti-Christian.

Additionally, parents offered concerns about individual freedom and parents' rights, which were not always based in fact. For example, one Glory parent said, "I'd like to for the sake of transparency to request that the board make the curriculums available to the parents, specifically any curriculum that covers social interactions, equity, and the second step program." An administrator answered, "Thank you. And just by way of information, all of the curricula are

available on our website and if you have any specific questions or requests for curricula or curricular information we can assist you." In this case, the parent was under the impression that the curriculum was not available when it was freely available (I confirmed this as well). Another parent claimed, "The only thing I can do is protect my child by having him opt out" regarding any DEI-oriented curriculum. On a slightly different note, a parent commented that parents should be given the choice over masking their children, claiming the district was "choosing politics over individual freedom." This final quote demonstrates how the districts' COVID-19 precautions elided with DEI-related concerns. Within this constructive "metanarrative" (Reed 2015)—that schools were pushing a left-wing, indoctrinating agenda and wanted to take away parents' rights—the actual *content* was malleable. One moment the concern might be DEI and the next it was COVID-19 precautions. Another parent, angry about COVID-19 precautions, exclaimed, "let the children have their childhood, this is the United States of America, not communist China, I get to make the decision for my child, I don't agree with these liberal folks running everything." This concern was again regarding COVID-19 precautions but could easily have been regarding DEI efforts. At the same time, parents sometimes leveraged the term "equity" to complain about COVID-19 precautions. At Glory, only teams that played outside were allowed to compete in Fall 2021. Parents complained that this was not equitable. Another parent stated "there needs to be equity for all" with regards to a teacher switch that happened when going hybrid. Finally, and perhaps most evocatively, one parent said, "It is your job to lead this district and you failed us [during COVID-19]. How dare you focus on critical race theory now? How dare you make this your priority for our children? Why aren't *our* children your priority?" This final quote reveals the true concern underlying DEI efforts: that white parents were losing control over the district, and they were irate. Overall, this political identity focused

on a weaponized version of colorblindness, in which any mention of race or racism could be construed as racist, anti-American, anti-Christian, and in conflict with personal freedom.

District as Balance Scale or Battleground

School districts, with their dual commitments to political neutrality and reducing inequality, were put in a particularly difficult spot during this time. While the position espoused by pro-DEI white parents was in-line with district priorities to reduce and educate about inequality, the position espoused by anti-DEI white parents made it impossible to maintain commitments to both of these values.

There were only a few occasions where districts responded to critiques from pro-DEI parents. At Carver, there were many concerns with the district choosing not to hire a DEI administrator, which the administrators simply shut down. At Glory, administrators simply referred parents back to the plan to develop a DEI plan. At Jefferson, there really were not any incidents like this to be seen. On occasion, though, the district did really undermine concerns from the left. For example, after the teacher read the n-word aloud in class while teaching *Stamped* at Carver, the superintendent defended her, claiming that she had been "caught up in the passion of the moment and had no malicious intent." He went on to claim, "the beautiful part of this incident is that it doesn't change the direction we're going." Essentially, he wanted and expected parents on the left to quietly accept any DEI work that the district was conducting.

In other cases, some district leaders offered earnest defenses of DEI work. This really only occurred at Jefferson, after Dr. Bates received personal attacks after sharing the plans for the equity audit. The out-going superintendent at Jefferson said,

> There's an old saying that goes when the student is ready, the teacher will appear. Over this last year, navigating through a global pandemic, we've seen inequities in our society laid bare. We've seen how age old systems are at the root of a lot of this inequity and in the disparities and outcomes that we've witnessed. As one of these systems, a school system.

> It's our job as a board to make decisions in the interest of all learners. It's our job to create policies and procedures that lead to opportunities by reviewing our practices through an equity lens.

He strongly stated that this was the way it was—they would be doing DEI work in the district. He spoke for quite awhile, detailing all of the achievement and opportunity gaps at Jefferson and explaining why it was important to the district's values to solve these problems. He concluded by stating, "our diversity is our strength." These were strong words from an out-going superintendent, and they did set the tone for that meeting. However, the attacks against DEI and Dr. Bates continued in later meetings, and, as I mentioned in chapter five, DEI efforts have either stalled or been made very private since April 2021. Neither Glory nor Carver's administrators gave such a full-throated speech in support of DEI work.

Instead, from my observations of school board meetings, conversations with teachers, and conversations with administrators themselves, it seemed clear that Glory and Carver (and Jefferson, too, at times) settled on different strategies. They used one strategy above all others: leaning on or reemphasizing the districts' values to connect the DEI work to the extant, nonpartisan values that were publicly available for parents to read before they chose the district. Sometimes this looked like attempts at educating the public, though unfortunately, due to the doctrinal purity inherent in the Republican parents' political identity, these efforts likely did not move the needle much. First, there were attempts to explain that CRT was not actually part of districts' curricula. These attempts, however, just encouraged the instigators of the moral panic to include more and more ideas under the "CRT" label, even including social emotional learning.[17] To give an example, Glory's superintendent offered the following statement:

> There has been much debate on the national stage regarding the teaching of critical race

[17] One article on the Federalist lists as terms the left uses to avoid using the term CRT: "social justice, equity, diversity training, anti-racism, culturally responsive pedagogy, anti-bias, inclusion, social-emotional learning."

> theory in schools. While this is apparently a well-known subject at the collegiate level, I had not encountered the phrase nor the topic until this spring. I have researched the topic and our administrative team participated in an educational session with a local college professor this summer to better understand the theory and the debate surrounding it. Here in Glory, we have neither added nor dropped anything from our curriculum as a result of the national debate. Our curriculum is available on our website, and building principals are available at any time to speak with families with any questions about units of study. As an administrative team and faculty, we remain committed to our district mission to "educate and develop all students as learners and citizens who are high-achieving, resilient and responsible in a changing global community." We teach historically and scientifically accurate course content k-12, which includes readings and lessons that challenge our students to consider multiple perspectives, to think critically, and to judge for themselves. We are committed to ensuring that every child receives a high-quality education regardless of their race, ethnicity, economic circumstances, gender, disability, history of trauma or other factors.

Again, the superintendent did not overtly say that they taught DEI and had no plans to stop. She said there had been "no change" to the curriculum, which was true at the time, but they *were* in the process of adding culturally responsive curriculum and African American history to their equity plan. She then simply reasserted the district's mission, using the commitments to their values to defend the content they *did* teach. Each of the districts put out "explainer" documents for the community, asserting similar claims. In Jefferson's version of this document, they *did* defend their equity work, but they made sure to emphasize that it was *not* CRT and should not be grouped in with the content the Republican machine is fomenting panic around. Next, in a letter from Carver to parents in August 2020 introducing the *Stamped* initiative, they said the following:

> The death of George Floyd on May 25 sparked national and international protests for racial justice. **As a public school district community, part of our collective job is to help students make sense of complex topics and develop the skills to communicate civilly with each other. Issues of race and ethnicity are complex and important topics, and we will be leaning into these conversations this school year.…** In the end, when Carver students graduate from our high school, we want all of our students to be knowledgeable about various cultures of peoples within America and have the skills to participate in informed and civil conversations about race and ethnicity. As a result of our teachers' guidance on these topics, our graduates will be able to effectively work with others in a multicultural workplace and be kind and trusted neighbors.

Carver administrators relied on their publicly stated purpose as a school—their dedication to preparing students to engage in a diverse world—to defend teaching a book some might disagree with.

Similarly, Jefferson relied heavily on leveraging their stated commitment to student development. In school board meetings, administrators would use the public space to explain how DEI work could potentially help foster positive development for all students. For example, in one school board meeting, the Jefferson superintendent asked Dr. Bates,

> you're talking about fostering positive identity development. What happens to a child when you don't foster positive identity development? Like, can you just talk to us a bit about that? What happens to that child and that child grows up into a young adult? How are their lives impacted if they don't have an education where they actually have mirrors?

Dr. Bates replied,

> So the goal that we are focused on, of course, is equity for every learner, and the approaches to foster positive identity and identity development for all of our students. And we believe that that comes by ensuring that our curriculum and our learning environment reflects diverse perspectives and contributions of people of color, certainly, but also women, individuals with disabilities and other cultural groups, so that our students have experiences across difference, and they have the knowledge and skills to respond to bias and racism and other isms, appropriately.

In her response, Dr. Bates emphasizes that the purpose behind this work was to foster student development, giving a clear alternative to the implication that the purpose was political indoctrination. Just like before the shocks of 2020, when districts would leverage their pre-existing, nonpartisan commitments to defend DEI work that might seem political, here Dr. Bates offered their commitment to "positive identity development" as a politically neutral explanation for DEI efforts.

Despite these efforts to use publicly espoused, nonpartisan values to validate their decision to pursue DEI work, districts also used strategies that then undermined the work.

Republican parents' stand against any kind of education about racism precluded any DEI work being perceived as politically neutral or nonpartisan. Despite this, one of the main strategies espoused by administrators was to bring the conversation back to neutral, to assert that DEI work is not political, taking away some of the power of the work. For example, one teacher, who was frustrated with Carver's DEI initiatives and with their response to anti-DEI parents, explained the district's impulses in the following way:

> When put in a difficult situation that seems to be what our admin do across the board [make it neutral]. Whenever there's a difficult topic they come back to neutral, there's never a real push or defense of anything, this is what studies show, etc. It's never about what's the best for our community, even though I think that's their intention. They seem to think that giving those kinds of responses [being neutral] is going to help but it does the opposite.

In this case, this teacher wished that the administrators *would* defend DEI work even if it was seen as political. Another teacher explained,

> They don't want anyone to feel threatened. They want to make big changes but they don't really want to make big waves. Or without just telling people 'newsflash this is what we're doing, you've got to get on board.' That's not what they're doing here.

Administrators confirmed this approach to me in interviews. For example, Dr. Gold explained that bringing parents back to neutral was her "go-to strategy" in coping with these kinds of conflicts. Additionally, Glory allowed an open period of public comment at school board meetings but decided to simply not respond to any parent comments in real time, effectively taking a neutral position in the conflict. One district administrator at Glory explained the situation as follows:

> on the CRT and library books, unfortunately that got looped into the politics of masking, the politics of Fox News…so in August it was about the masks and then the CRT. CRT shifted quickly to SEL [social-emotional learning], and the way we decided to handle it was.... we didn't comment or respond to questions at board meetings. The public can say whatever they want, and then at the following meeting, I'd provide general information and answer questions in writing by the end of the week. That significantly changed the tenor of the meetings.

Here, the administrator asserted that by just giving these parents the floor and not responding in any way, the tenor of the meetings changed—it became less combative. The price of these less-combative meetings, though, was that the rest of the community could not see the district take a firm stance against these attacks.

In terms of curricular content, districts offered two strategies to mitigate the culture clash. First, they made sure parents knew they were allowed to opt their children out of any curricular content they disagreed with. This was not an entirely new strategy—Carver employed this strategy with the few parents concerned about the Give Voice program in 2019. At one school board meeting, I observed the following interaction:

> Parent: "Can students opt out of activities related to *Stamped*?"
> Administrator: "If a person objects to something there is a conversation, we come to an understanding. A parent is always allowed to opt their child out from the curriculum with the similar amount of work. For example, lessons on evolution or contraception, an alternative could be *The Secret Lives of US Presidents.* A book that explores a similar chronology."

Teachers found this very frustrating. When describing the *Stamped* initiative, one Carver teacher explained,

> you had parents that were happy and parents that were angry and because those parents outweighed you made the decision... if little Johnny doesn't wanna read it we're not going to make him. So, what was the point? I can't pick and choose history so why should they? What do we teach? The truth. Coddle it, and your son grows up and can't understand why POC [people of color] are mad all around and picketing.

This teacher was really frustrated when we spoke, and it shows in her response. She felt that by allowing parents to opt their children out of DEI-related curriculum, it undermined the entire effort. It created, in a sense, "two schools in one building," but instead of division by *track,* there was division by parental curricular choice.

As well as offering the option to "opt out," Carver administrators explained that in

addition to teaching *Stamped* as a one-book initiative in 2020*,* they would be teaching "the other side" of the debate. This was another common strategy espoused by districts—teaching "both sides" of DEI-related issues. The administrator in charge of humanities curriculum for the district explained the following to parents at one widely attended Carver school board meeting in Fall 2020:

> We already teach: a feminist perspective. Who might object? A cultural conservative who believes in gender roles. But we still present the facts, for example women earned the right to vote. We also teach a neo-conservative perspective—an assertive promotion of US interests through military means. Who might object? Pacifists. Despite this objective, we still teach this perspective so students understand how to enter into discussions of history, power, politics. We go back to facts. Then we consider the African American perspective, and America is still dealing with the ramifications of slavery. Who might object to this? Someone who wants to see America through a colorblind lens, saying I don't see color, what's the big deal? But still we teach this perspective because the history informs the present…. Another perspective is the libertarian perspective, the government should be as small as possible. Who might object? People who want a government that provides social services. So we teach this. These are multiple ways that we help students understand issues of history, power, politics, and government. In social studies. So *Stamped* is provided to students in grades 7-12. And then a new book for 5-6 entitled *New Kid*. For younger children, some read aloud books that focus on race that are appropriate. So we're not waiting until secondary ed to talk about race and diversity. We don't hide from difficult conversations but our teachers don't tell students what to think. Instead they ask what do YOU think and what do OTHERS think. We're not forcing the beliefs of the teacher onto everyone. This is why we teach multiple perspectives.

Here, the administrator presented each of these perspectives as legitimate and on even ground, despite the fact that some (like libertarianism) were distinct political lenses while others (like African American perspectives) were grounded in lived experience. While certainly it is the job of educators to teach about white supremacy and other ideas that have wreaked havoc in society, teaching these as equivalent perspectives undermines any lessons about structural racism. Carver was not the only school to espouse this kind of logic. Jefferson's superintendent asserted that "anything that has any perspective needs to include both sides of an issue. Coaching people to say, you can bring anything you want but can't only paint things in one light." And again, this

becomes a problem when the issue in question is racism—how can you teach both sides and remain honest and not bigoted? I want to emphasize here that these were not last-ditch tactics—this was something the districts were proud of. When speaking of DEI efforts at Carver, Dr. Gold proudly explained,

> These were not one-sided conversations in which we promote a single lens on such complicated topics. We welcomed officers of the Carver Police Department to join our high school literature circles. Everyone agreed that we want all people to be treated fairly, without prejudice, and to be safe from physical harm. And then we talked.

In this explanation, Dr. Gold depicts offering "both sides" of a complex issue like police violence. While she positively framed this as offering a diversity of opinions, ultimately, when it comes to systemic inequalities, there are not two legitimate sides of the conversation. There might be different approaches to solving the issue, critiques of potential DEI efforts, or scholarly debates about the nature and contours of structural racism. However, any assertion that there are two legitimate sides to structural racism at the K–12 level ultimately just undermines the lesson that structural racism is still a key problem in our society. This tactic, in addition to the option to "opt out" of any DEI initiative, ultimately pushes school districts to the right by effectively undermining their DEI work.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I explored the way parents debated about DEI efforts in response to the "shock" of Floyd's murder. As I demonstrated in chapter four, the norms around what was classified as political changed during Trump's campaign and election. This opened the door for the current culture clashes depicted in this chapter. Then, as I described in chapter five, the dual shocks of the pandemic and Floyd's murder occurred. In response to this latter shock, DEI work became more publicly discussed and much more highly visible in the districts. This in turn created an opportune moment for a "moral panic" around DEI work, which Republicans

fomented, using CRT as a synecdoche that stood in for teaching anything perceived as having to do with racism (Reed 2015). They used a metanarrative stemming from a weaponized colorblind ideology, explaining that DEI efforts paint white children as evil "oppressors" and Black children and other children of color as helpless "victims," which ultimately is anti-American, anti-Christian, racist, and divisive. Anti-DEI parents at the districts repeated these ideas from Republicans, fully embracing this moral panic, which was clearly incited by the Republican establishment—even district administrators noted that Tucker Carlson's rant du jour cleanly predicted the complaints they would receive the next day.

On the other hand, pro-DEI white parents tended to express their beliefs about DEI efforts through a lens of diversity ideology. Many Black parents also supported districts' DEI work, but they pushed the districts to do more and were wary of unintended consequences for their children. In the end, I argue that white parent politics on both the right and the left were related to their racial ideologies and social positioning. However, Grossman and Hopkins' 2015 assertion stands in that parents on the right were susceptible to moral panic because of their strict belief in their party's doctrine, whereas both white and Black parents on the left were more interested in strategic DEI work that would support all children, though they expressed this interest differently. The districts were committed to maintaining political neutrality, both in cultural conflicts between parents and in keeping curricular content nonpartisan. However, the nature of this moral panic made it impossible for school districts to maintain this neutrality while still fulfilling their responsibilities as public schools.

Political Identities at School

Achen and Bartels (2017) argue that citizens of *both* parties are more driven by social identity and group attachments than particular policy interests. Other scholars have illustrated

how this argument unfolds among rural Wisconsin voters (Cramer 2016) and among gun owners (Lacombe 2021). My findings resonate with this argument, as social identity and social positioning certainly played a role in how these parents interpreted districts' DEI efforts. However, rather than a specific demographic category like race or class (Cramer 2016) or a specific interest like guns (Lacombe 2021), I find that *racial ideology* explains the politics these parent groups gravitated towards. This demonstrates that social identity goes beyond who individuals *are* or how they identify. The way people see themselves and others, or the way they understand structural inequalities like race, is also an aspect of their social identity. In this chapter, I demonstrate how the racial ideologies parents demonstrated correlate with the politics that they engaged in at school board meetings.

Thus, parents came into this culture clash with different racial ideologies and different kinds of politics. How did the district respond? As I described in chapter four, school districts are expected to maintain their institutional commitments to both political neutrality *and* reducing and educating about inequality. These commitments were clearly in conflict at this point because any attempt to reduce or educate about inequality was painted as partisan by anti-DEI parents. As Meyer and Rowan (1977) argue, when two institutional myths come into conflict, both cannot be tightly coupled to everyday life. Both here and in chapter four, districts attempted to split the difference and uphold both commitments. However, they were still accused of partisanship, *and* they undermined their efforts to reduce or educate about inequality. In this way, they prioritized being seen as nonpartisan over efforts to reduce or educate about inequality.

Districts attempted to split the difference in a few ways. First, they reasserted their public, nonpartisan district values to explain their commitment to DEI work. They restated mission statements or attempted to educate the public about how DEI work aligned with their

stated, public, shared values. They sometimes used these values to attempt to bring angry parents to a neutral place. Rather than giving a full-throated defense of antiracist DEI work, they used neutral, child-focused values to defend the efforts. For example, they would talk about how DEI is important for identity development or for creating global citizens. Glory asserted neutrality by simply *not responding* when parents critiqued their DEI efforts at school board meetings. Finally, districts ultimately offered anti-DEI parents the option to opt their children out of DEI lessons and asserted that they would teach "both sides" of issues like structural racism. This re-asserted neutrality, combined with these efforts to appease Republican parents, ends up pushing the districts' balance scales to the right.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

I began this dissertation by discussing the multiple stories that weave throughout the project, stories about institutions, race, politics, and disruption. Over the course of the last five chapters, I have used these various theoretical and empirical ideas to explore how suburban school districts made sense of inequality between 2019–2021. These chapters illustrate how suburban school districts *already* had a blueprint for interpreting inequality—what I call the DEI Doctrine—even before diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) took center stage in 2020 and then opposition to "critical race theory" became a hot-button issue. In the end, I hope that my specific findings and arguments about Carver, Glory, Jefferson, and the broader sample of school districts contribute to broader knowledge in several sociological subfields as well as in practical application. In this final chapter, I will first summarize the major arguments contained in the five empirical chapters, and then I will describe how these arguments contribute to sociological literatures and have potential applications for policy and practice in education.

SUMMARY

Overall, this dissertation describes the blueprint suburban school districts followed when interpreting and responding to inequality. I call this blueprint the DEI Doctrine, and it consists of three tenets:

1. Schools, school districts, and their workers have a professional responsibility to fix inequality and to educate students about broader social inequalities.
2. DEI initiatives focus on creating representational diversity to the exclusion of other potential equity goals.
3. DEI initiatives are nonpartisan, and able to exist in communion with districts' commitment to political neutrality.

The first three empirical chapters (chapters 2–4) mirror these tenets, with each chapter establishing and describing each of these rules. In chapter two, I use data from the broader sample of suburban school districts in the area to outline the institutional myths guiding district decision-making. Drawing on institutional theory, and specifically inhabited institutionalism (Hallett and Hawbaker 2020), I argue that these institutional myths guide and are guided by organizations and interactions on the ground. By analyzing Comprehensive Plans, which are a standardized policy document that all districts across the state must file, I find that districts have many institutional myths in common. These include commitments to achievement and excellence; diversity and inclusion; preparing students to succeed in a global society; character (specifically a focus on individuality and individualism); and community.

Institutional theory posits that organizations existing in the same institutional fields will be isomorphic or will grow to be more and more similar to one another (Meyer and Rowan 1977). Given this, it is not surprising that the districts have shared institutional myths. After establishing these shared myths, I describe each commitment in detail, using evidence from the Comprehensive Plans as well as interview data to triangulate these official district statements. After describing the myths, I demonstrate how, together, these myths constitute a professional commitment to reducing and educating about inequality.

In chapter three, I build on these findings in order to describe the second tenet of the DEI Doctrine: that districts' DEI work occurs within a framework of diversity ideology. While chapter two establishes that districts had a professional responsibility to reduce and educate about inequality, those official statements and commitments do not explain what inequality *means* in this context. In this case, it was important to illustrate how district personnel, who contended professionally with the obligation to *engage* with inequality, defined the idea.

In order to answer these questions, I relied on data from the three case study districts, interpreted in conjunction with theories about racial ideology along with the ideas from institutional theory that undergird the entire project. I find that district personnel understand inequality as a problem of representational diversity. For example, they were concerned with creating representational diversity in advanced courses, so the demographics of students in these courses would be proportional with their overall students population. I argue that this conceptualization of inequality is evidence of their dominant racial ideology—diversity ideology. However, the specific tenets of diversity ideology that I observe are different from what previous scholarship finds (Mayorga-Gallo 2019). I argue that these differences occurred because of institutional context.

Next, I find that this understanding of inequality leads to DEI initiatives focused on *creating* that representational diversity. These initiatives were focused on *access,* finding ways to get more underrepresented students into advanced courses, for them to reach academic success, or for the district to have more diverse curricula. These policies were either additive—*adding* supports—or subtractive—*removing* barriers. I then assess whether the institutional commitment to reducing and educating about inequality is decoupled from organizational life, as previous literature might expect (Ray 2019). I find that the institutional commitment is *not* decoupled from organizational life, as these DEI policies were implemented with fidelity.

In chapter four, I describe the third tenet of the DEI Doctrine: that DEI initiatives are nonpartisan and able to exist in communion with districts' commitment to political neutrality. I begin the chapter by explaining that public school districts operate under an expectation that they will maintain political neutrality. This is an interesting paradox, as many scholars have argued that schools are inherently political institutions (e.g., Apple 1993). Nonetheless, the districts in

my study were committed to maintaining their political neutrality or nonpartisanship. I provide evidence for this commitment both from the literature and from my interview data.

Next, I discuss how this commitment was challenged in the years following Trump's campaign and election, arguing that norms around what "counted" as political or partisan changed under Trump. I then illustrate the various ways that the districts in my study responded to this shift. I find that there were three aspects to this response. First, they sometimes doubled down on their extant DEI efforts, using their pre-existing official values, like diversity, inclusion, and preparing students to succeed in a global society, as cover. Second, these shifting norms actually reinvigorated conversations about equity in the districts. Third, I find that these shifting norms ultimately limited districts' DEI efforts in an attempt to avoid accusations of partisanship. I argue that districts' attempts to be nonpartisan are resonant with Mayorga-Gallo's (2019) "liability" tenet of diversity ideology. While Mayorga-Gallo (2019) defines liability as the fear white people have about consequences of racial diversity, in my study, I find that the districts were concerned about the consequences of DEI initiatives seeming partisan.

In the next two chapters, chapters five and six, I examine how these three tenets held up under the pressure of the shocks of 2020. While this dissertation was not originally designed as a "before and after" project, the twin crises of COVID-19 and George Floyd's police murder reverberated through the districts in my study (as well as through institutions around the country). I studied how these shocks affected the way districts interpreted inequality and conceptualized DEI initiatives. In chapter five, I first examine the broader sample, demonstrating how political variation in the 60 districts explains divergent responses to Floyd's murder. Next, I looked specifically at how the three case study districts responded to Floyd's murder through increasingly visible DEI work. Unlike the first three chapters, where I find that the districts were

mostly very similar, the districts responded to this crisis differently. At Carver, district administrators tried to do too much too fast, in order to maintain their status as a DEI leader in the area. They attempted to include community members and teachers in a committee but ultimately did not continue to include these stakeholders as they made their decisions. At Jefferson, the district promoted a vice principal into a specific DEI administrator role. They had this one administrator shoulder the burden of the DEI work and the backlash to this work. Finally, at Glory, they took a longer time to establish a more public DEI plan that involved careful consideration of student, teacher, and community needs. I argue that Glory's DEI response was the most successful because they arrived at concrete, specific actions whereas Carver and Jefferson did not.

Finally, in the sixth chapter, I illustrate how the norms around partisan politics that shifted under Trump opened the door for the intensive backlash from parents who repeated conservative talking points as they lambasted the districts for supposedly teaching Critical Race Theory. I find that the increased visibility of the districts' DEI work, paired with the Republican media talking about the dangers of "critical race theory," came together to form a "moral panic" around DEI work (Reed 2015). I argue that this moral panic *also* stemmed from anti-DEI parents' colorblind racial ideology, as they believed that schools should be colorblind, arguing that DEI efforts painted white children as evil "oppressors" and Black children and other children of color as helpless "victims." On the other hand, pro-DEI parents tended to respond to the murder of Floyd by supporting districts' DEI efforts through a lens of diversity ideology. All together, these chapters hold implications for research in several sociological subfields, as well as for policy.

Together, the findings and arguments in this dissertation broaden extant scholarly knowledge about how suburban school districts conceptualize and implement DEI initiatives. While many scholars before me have described the inequality in the suburbs (e.g., Lewis and Diamond 2015; Lewis-McCoy 2014), fewer scholars have attended to the ways these districts *respond* to that inequality (Turner 2020). In this study, I describe how school districts made sense of and responded to inequality between 2019–2021. By analyzing three case study districts and 60 surrounding districts' official documents, I find that these districts interpret inequality and implement DEI initiatives in similar ways, which I call the DEI Doctrine. Together, the three tenets of the DEI Doctrine explain several different phenomena and inform both theory and practice in education.

INSTITUTIONAL MYTHS IN SUBURBAN DISTRICTS

In order to investigate how suburban school districts interpreted and responded to inequality, it was important to answer the following open question: Do suburban school personnel even *care* about inequality? Is inequality an important concern for suburban districts? While this might seem like a callous accusation, it is a legitimate question to consider. Suburban school districts tend to perform well on official measures of success, like standardized tests and graduation rates. Given this, it is plausible that these districts might ignore the inequality in their schools, focusing instead on other priorities. However, the findings that lead me to the first tenet of the DEI Doctrine—that suburban school districts have a professional responsibility to reduce and educate about inequality—demonstrate that this is not the case. Suburban districts are focused on maintaining their image of *excellence* in schooling, and this focus on excellence includes all students: high average scores are not enough to meet this goal. Additionally, most districts emphasize educating students to succeed in a global society, a phrase popularized by the

movement for multicultural education which emphasized diverse curricula and educating students about inequality. By establishing this professional responsibility to both reducing and educating about inequality, I hope to broaden the conversation about inequality in the suburbs to include district personnel as important, invested stakeholders—even if sometimes they are found to "perform" their commitment to reducing inequality in ways that are insufficient to the cause. Additionally, while the shocks of 2020 certainly made inequality more of a hot-button issue, this data demonstrates that districts were already engaged in DEI work before these shocks.

LIMITS OF "ACCESS" AND PERFORMATIVE DEI POLICIES

School districts (along with many other institutions) are often accused of *performing* a commitment to reducing inequality but not *actually* being committed. I hope that the ideas in this dissertation can push the conversation beyond a focus on the dichotomy between performance and actual commitment. Ultimately, this dichotomy is not useful for improving DEI initiatives, because the interactions that *produce* the "performance" are between individuals who believe they are demonstrating a true commitment to DEI. While DEI initiatives can certainly be insensitive, inconsiderate, careless, or actively harmful, and while of course I could not truly determine how deeply these stakeholders truly cared about their DEI work, the data from my dissertation suggests that this professional responsibility is one they take seriously.

I come to this conclusion by first triangulating official value statements with interview data and then by analyzing how these institutional commitments unfold in organizational life. I demonstrate that their institutional commitment is tightly coupled to—overlaps considerably with—day-to-day organizational life. Theoretically, this resolves a tension in the literature between the previous research on organizations, which argues that racialized organizations will decouple commitments to DEI from organizational life (Ray 2019), and previous institutional

research on school districts, which argues that as accountability policies have taken hold, there has been tighter coupling between districts and institutional myths (Rowan and Meyer 2006; Coburn 2004; Hallett 2010). This research resolves this tension when it comes to suburban school districts, which certainly classify as racial organizations (Ray 2019) but are also organizations operating with a professional commitment to reducing and educating about inequality. This suggests that school districts—and perhaps specifically *suburban* districts (as this is my sample)—might need a categorization of their own: racialized organizations committed to reducing inequality. Studying this more specific category of racialized organizations could yield interesting future work on how commitments to reducing inequality take shape in various kinds of organizations.

Practically, this finding *also* informs how DEI consultants or critics of districts' DEI work might approach school personnel. Districts have a professional commitment to reducing and educating about inequality through DEI, and this commitment is upheld through DEI policies and initiatives that are embedded in day-to-day life at schools. I find that these policies were implemented with fidelity in the districts that I studied. However, considering failed or stalled DEI initiatives from this angle might help practitioners as they work with district personnel. Rather than spending time trying to convince or educate these leaders about the importance of DEI, trainings could take an approach that assumes these leaders *do* care or at least feel professionally responsible to act.

Therefore, rather than focusing on whether or not the districts were truly committed to DEI, I focus on the *meaning* behind their DEI initiatives. Despite the fact that the common acronym is DEI—diversity, equity, and inclusion—I find that DEI initiatives in these schools tended to focus on creating representational diversity. The districts were dedicating their efforts

to promote *proportionality,* meaning a proportional number of white students and students of color and of affluent and lower-socioeconomic status (SES) students in advanced courses. While disciplinary policies are not the focus of this study, these districts were also concerned with the *over* representation of students of color being suspended, and they were working to create proportionality in that aspect of school life as well. Districts were focused on providing access through either removing barriers or building in supports so that students of color and lower SES students would be able to take advanced courses in numbers proportional to the overall demographics of their student body. These policies—whether intentionally or not—respond to previous scholarly findings about inequality in the suburbs. For example, Lewis and Diamond (2015) argue that while *ostensive* policies are equitable, the way they are enacted is inequitable. Specifically, they pinpoint teacher recommendations as a key discriminatory mechanism in racialized tracking in the district they study. All three districts in my study *also* identified informal processes like teacher recommendations and prerequisite course requirements as barriers leading to a lack of representational diversity in advanced courses, and they tried to remove these barriers through subtractive and additive access-oriented policies. I find that these policies were tightly coupled to day-to-day school life, meaning that they were not just for show but were actually making a difference in how students, teachers, and families approached course taking.

However, policies like these, that are geared toward proportionality or representational diversity inherently reify the current structure of the school. If the structure of advanced course taking is unfairly sorting students, it is plausible that districts could take a more radical approach to the problem by reconsidering the nature of this structure (Burris and Garrity 2008; Domina, et al 2017; Handsman et al. 2022). However, that was not happening in these districts. Their DEI

efforts were dedicated toward creating a true meritocracy, a utopic institution, where they could have sorting systems that did not reflect structural inequalities in society. On the one hand, it is hard to imagine a school district that could be a true meritocracy, so this goal seems farfetched. On the other hand, if it is not a possibility for these districts to consider the underlying structures perpetuating inequality, it *is* important to make the extant structures as fair as possible. In either case, these findings demonstrate that any issues with DEI initiatives—at least before 2020—were not really issues of implementation, but issues of imagination.

REPRESENTATIONAL DIVERSITY IN CURRICULUM ELIDED WITH CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Additionally, districts were concerned with representational diversity in their curricular texts. They talked often about providing students with "mirrors and windows," characters in books that both reflected their own identities and showed them other ways that people experience the world (Style 1988). However, representational diversity in curricular texts was often where the conversation began and where it ended. This is not to undermine the importance of representation in curricular texts, as "mirrors and windows" can be a very powerful force for students. However, often these efforts were discussed as culturally responsive teaching or pedagogy. Culturally responsive teaching is a theoretical tradition begun by Gloria Ladson-Billings in 1995, and diverse curricula are certainly *part* of this tradition. However, Ladson-Billings explains in both her 1995 piece and in later articles (2014) that diverse curricula are only *one part* of a tradition that also includes academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness among its goals. By focusing on diversifying curricula, and presenting these initiatives as DEI work, districts were eliding the idea of diverse curricula with critical consciousness, which are two separate endeavors. As Melamed (2011) explains, arguments over

diversifying curricula were ultimately meaningless when it came to combatting inequality. By focusing on representation, these debates (which, in her text, exist at the higher education level) obscure the real problem of inequality. The phenomenon of diversifying K–12 curricula is related; by diversifying curricula and declaring that DEI work, these districts did not ultimately engage with the critical consciousness element that culturally responsive teaching requires.

RACIAL IDEOLOGY AND INSTITUTIONAL MYTHS

Throughout the dissertation, I argue that the *reason* DEI initiatives focus on representational diversity has to do with the dominant racial ideology in the districts. I find that district personnel operate under a diversity ideology, which correlates with DEI initiatives grounded in a diversity framework. The term "diversity ideology" was introduced by Sarah Mayorga-Gallo (2019), who argues that this ideology consists of four tenets: white people's acceptance or tolerance of people of color, white people's good intentions, commodification of people of color, and white people's concern over the potential consequences of increased racial diversity. Mayorga-Gallo developed these tenets from a dataset that consisted of interviews with white millennials, so it follows that these tenets might not be broadly applicable to many white people across the United States. However, while I find that district personnel are focused on diversity as well, I also find that the elements of their racial ideology do not quite match Mayorga-Gallo's tenets. District personnel are focused on celebrating and leveraging diversity, their professional responsibility to reduce and educate about inequality, proportionality or representational diversity in advanced courses and curriculum, and the liability DEI efforts might create with certain white parents. I do not believe that my findings invalidate or even necessarily conflict with Mayorga-Gallo's. Instead, I hypothesize that the diversity ideology is mediated by their institutional commitment to reducing and educating about inequality. In other words,

because these individuals are operating within this specific institutional context, in which attention to inequality is important, the specific tenets of their racial ideology are slightly different. This finding contributes to a general understanding of racial ideology and sets the stage for future research examining how dominant racial ideologies are mediated by the institutional myths or commitments in the environment.

SCHOOL DISTRICTS AS POLITICAL SPACES

The third tenet of the DEI doctrine focuses on political neutrality, arguing that even as districts create DEI initiatives, they maintain their commitment to nonpartisanship at school. I find in my data that districts prioritized maintaining political neutrality or nonpartisan status, even as changing norms under Trump, and then the shock of Floyd's murder, reinvigorated conversations about equity in the districts. Schools occupy many distinct and difficult positions in society, but this paradox—that they must be politically neutral even though *schooling itself* is a political institution—is one of the thorniest. Despite an ongoing legal debate about whether public school students count as a captive audience (Salkin 2015), districts in my study operated under the assumption that they could not say, do, or teach anything that anyone could potentially interpret as partisan. While this might not have been salient five or ten years ago, Trump's rhetoric made even a focus on representational diversity seem partisan. While the teachers and administrators in my study did not pretend race and racism were issues of the past, they *did* present a structural understanding of racism as *one valid option* for understanding the world. In this way, they could maintain a surface-level commitment to their stated values while also maintaining political neutrality. This demonstrates the "liability" tenet of diversity ideology—even if district personnel understood that structural racism created inequalities relevant in their

schools, they could not present this as fact (only as one valid opinion) because of their fear of seeming partisan.

Additionally, this rhetoric opened the door for the attacks that began in 2020 against Critical Race Theory. The fact that districts were committed to maintaining this tone of political neutrality, despite the lies and misinformation coming from the political right, is notable. By accepting these changed norms by maintaining their commitment to nonpartisanship, these districts allowed the rhetoric of the political right to determine what counted as "too political" for schools. This means that, even in three districts where *at least* half of families voted for Clinton in 2016 and Biden in 2020, Republican messaging still influenced what districts decided was appropriate to teach. This is an evocative finding, especially when considering how it might extend to both districts more homogenously Republican and the uproar over Critical Race Theory beginning in 2020.

This uproar over Critical Race Theory has been widely publicized, with stories of parents accosting school board members and generally disrupting proceedings to harangue school districts for teaching any topic related to race or racism. While examining this dynamic was not part of my initial research design, I was able to see this moral panic unfold by observing school board meetings. I was able to offer descriptions of the various elements of these parents' complaints, arguing that they were operating under a weaponized colorblind ideology. While many scholars focus on how schools are inherently political because they are a state socialization tool, I find that schools are *also* important battlegrounds in which to observe emerging political identities. While these anti-Critical Race Theory parents might have been active "keyboard warriors," complaining on social media, something about this moment mobilized these parents to take part in these political debates at school. While certainly scholars have studied parental

debates over schooling (e.g., Binder 2002), my findings offer grounds for potential future work using schools specifically as a site to uncover emerging political identities, following in the footsteps of political scientists who study how these identities emerge and how politicians leverage them for their causes (i.e., Cramer 2016; Lacombe 2021).

CHAOS AND DISRUPTION

In addition to these contributions directly related to the three tenets of the DEI Doctrine, this dissertation also offers some perspectives on the consequences of disruptions. Scholars across multiple disciplines and subfields have argued that disruptions, sometimes called exogenous shocks, unsettled times, or critical junctures, can open the door for further change. Swidler (1986), for example, argues that in unsettled times, new ideologies can emerge, battling it out for dominance. In my previous work, I have argued that disruptions are not all equivalent in their potential for change, after finding that one school district made major policy changes after the disruption of the Common Core Standards in mathematics (Handsman et al. 2022). However, we argued that this disruption was *constrained* in that it only affected *one* major aspect of schooling. In contrast, the disruptions of 2020—most notably, COVID-19—disrupted *every* major aspect of schooling. The police murder of George Floyd, then, occurred within the context of the totalizing disruption of the pandemic. In this case, I do not find that new ideologies or policy ideas really took hold—instead, I find that the DEI Doctrine *absorbed the shocks* and continued to guide how suburban school districts interpreted inequality. The only partial exception to this finding was Glory, whose district administrators took the time to gather information from the community about what was important to them to see in their schools. In this case, Glory's eventual DEI initiatives were not solely focused on representational diversity but broadened to focus on community care. Otherwise, though, the DEI Doctrine held. This

finding offers potential openings for future research that examines how organizations, and especially schools, fall back on or generate new ideas during variously scaled disruptions.

WORKING TOWARDS AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE DEI DOCTRINE

In the end, these findings and arguments point to several changes districts can make as they consider how to interpret inequality and plan DEI initiatives, as well as ideas consultants can consider as they work with these districts. This is not a definitive list, to be sure, but a set of three *alternatives* to hopefully spark conversations about the possibilities of suburban schooling:

1. Maintain the sense of professional responsibility towards fixing inequality but simultaneously *broaden* the meaning of inequality.
2. Move beyond representational diversity by listening to the community.
3. Reframe the idea of political neutrality to actively combat the rhetoric from the right.

To start, I suggest that districts continue to maintain their sense of professional obligation to reduce and educate about inequality and that consultants working with or critiquing suburban districts *also* operate under the assumption that this is a goal that is important to these districts. At the same time, I suggest broadening the definition of inequality beyond unequal representation to consider more imaginative possibilities for suburban schools. I found in this dissertation that these districts do not have a problem of *implementation* but a problem of *imagination.* Therefore, perhaps cultivating the ability to imagine radically different futures for the districts would be a good next step. One way to do this might be to listen to and work with their communities, especially communities of color and low-income communities in the district. As emerged at Glory, when taking community needs and ideas seriously, districts are almost certainly going to be pushed beyond representational diversity. As one respondent explained, when discussing the problems with Carver's Equity Taskforce, "It was a bunch of white ladies

sitting on these subcommittees, trying to establish what the problems were that we wanted to fix. We don't really know what the problems are, because we're white ladies." Finally, in this asymmetrically polarized political atmosphere, rather than maintaining neutrality above all else, districts need to maintain *truth* and work to combat accusations from the right rather than capitulate to them.

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