Equity and Excellence: The Story of Lake Shore Community High School's Quest for Racial Justice in Education

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EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE: THE STORY OF LAKE SHORE COMMUNITY HIGH SCHOOL’S QUEST FOR RACIAL JUSTICE IN EDUCATION

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Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of Doctor of Education in the Foster G. McGaw Graduate School National College of Education National Louis University December 2015
EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE: THE STORY OF LAKESHORE COMMUNITY HIGH SCHOOL’S QUEST FOR RACIAL JUSTICE IN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Institutional racism is integral to U.S. social structure, including the public schools. Instituting a limited high school detracking program as a strategy to deal with racial achievement disparities faced strong community resistance. Leadership and a perfect storm of social and political factors made successful implementation of a detracking initiative possible. School community leaders and staff were interviewed about their experiences of systemic change to further access for students of color to honors classes. Results suggest some leadership qualities and characteristics that facilitated the change; the external factors that contributed to the successful change for racial equity are also detailed.
PREFACE

Historically, lack of racial equity has led to racially based achievement gaps among students in the United States. Increasing African American high school students’ access to honors-level course work increases their potential to excel, but implementing such changes presents a substantial challenge to the status quo, because the inequalities are integral to an institutionally racist social structure from which White people benefit. Race must be addressed.

Two authors have helped me think through the role of race in educational change. Derrick Bell has helped me unpack how race is addressed in the law and how the experience of race is played out in American institutions. Gloria Ladson-Billings helped me understand how Bell’s work could explain and provide a rigorous analysis of a prevailing achievement gap (or opportunity gap) in the educational system.

As a person of color, to engage in a discussion of the achievement gap I must connect my personal journey in education and my path of racial consciousness. Phenomenology—the study of the structures of experience and consciousness—has helped me understand this, but the most important source of insight has been Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT, with its insistence upon critically examining the intersection of race and all other social issues, not only informs the ideas behind this study, but CRT’s emphasis on the importance of the personal narrative underlies my approach. I have used my own journey as part of this study; many of my interview questions highlight the personal journeys of respondents with regard to race. This dissertation takes CRT and my personal experience, a phenomenological approach, to discover the leadership lessons
associated with Lake Shore Community High School’s quest for racial equity by detracking.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

My ideas rest on the assumption that racially based disparities in student achievement are a manifestation of institutional racism in the United States. I consider tracking an institutional form of racism as I follow the experience of detracking at Lake Shore Community High School (LSCHS). This is not a strategy paper. My purpose is to gather leadership lessons of transformation from school leaders at LSCHS. The power of this story is in the journey and the leadership lessons one can take away from it. The expedition illustrates our weaknesses, strengths, biases, fears, and hopes.

Research over the past two decades has proven the controversial, ineffective, and racist nature of the school policy known as tracking. Tracking is the grouping of students based on their ability levels. In the most traditional settings, tracking usually groups high numbers of minority students in low-level tracks, while it groups White students in high-level tracks. Lower-level tracks are typically plagued with discipline problems and are staffed by unqualified teachers who have low expectations. Higher-level courses typically have high standards of rigor, highly qualified teachers, and an engaging and challenging curriculum. Under tracking, the experiences of students remain separate and unequal.

Throughout the course of my academic learning in graduate school, it has been rewarding to absorb the multiple theoretical frameworks that explore racial inequity in the schools, particularly discussions in which both race and education are examined, because the relationship between race and education is critical to addressing the racially based disparities in student achievement. One of the most compelling revelations of the research discloses the inequities and the implication that schools serve as something other than educational institutions. Schools function as an apparatus of social reproduction,
perpetuating the status quo. Schools are not institutions of empowerment and change. For students of color, schools are not meant to change society, but to ensure a democratic capitalistic society, where the rich acquire wealth and the poor die trying. The polity and process of schooling have become rather polluted with bussing issues, curriculum alignment, and student placement, rather than focusing on issues such as closing the achievement gap and the lack of meaningful teaching and learning happening in urban centers. Decisions regarding the policies in our public schools have become so politically charged that the mere mention of a shift in practice or the possibility of a discussion that would empower students of color has the potential to ignite a large controversy, which in itself is a possible barrier to change. Because schools have the potential to change which people have power in society, it is no wonder these protests occur.

Those in the schools who benefit from the status quo have much to lose, so transformational leadership is needed to change our schools (Wagner, 2011). Especially if the federal government never allocates another dollar and public confidence in teachers continues to decline, there exists a need for transformational leaders who will pick up the mantle and lead so that no child is left behind. The government cannot mandate that schools teach all children, but transformational leaders are the ones who can make sure that all students will learn. If more teachers and district leaders had the mindsets and tools to reach all students, our school systems would not be failing (Payne, 2008).

In its quest for racial equity, LSCHS has begun to detrack. The action of detracking reflects a level of courageous leadership for the cause of closing the opportunity gap. The work of detracking is to move to more heterogeneous academic environments, where students of a more diverse score range are in the same classes.
Tracking has historically been problematic in that it separates students of various racial and socioeconomic statuses, which many argue is de facto segregation (Gamoran, 1992).

**Race and the Achievement Gap**

The issue we are dealing with—the disparity in achievement scores between students who are White and students of color—has been a concern for a long time, as is clear in this paper’s Review of the Literature. The issue has been at times described as the opportunity gap, but for the purposes of this paper, we are using the descriptor the achievement gap. There is much discourse regarding how schools are attempting to close this achievement gap. One critical issue is the question of all children’s abilities; my premise is that the discrepancies in scores do not arise from racially based differences in ability. The general thinking is that although many students of color are not generally meeting standards on state assessments, the cause is not a lack of intelligence or what some would call “ability.” As one takes a look at the data from several school districts all over the country, there remains a persistent achievement gap between White students and students of color (Paige, 2009). The detracking solution is based upon the idea that discrepancies arise from differing educational experiences. There are many possible ways a school district might address these differences. Many districts are attempting to address the opportunity gap by having open and honest discussions about race and its impact on education (Singleton, 2006).

Others are looking at the issue of instruction (Lasdon-Billings, 1995). Although it is a part of the solution to the racially based achievement gap, instruction alone does not address the problem of social and systemic isolation. There are many who believe that it is enough for schools with White staffs to become culturally proficient or culturally
relevant by having conversations about racial equity (Ladson-Billings, 1995), but this alone will not reach the ultimate goal: to eliminate the achievement gap within schools. A reading of the literature reveals the systemic and comprehensive issues in play. This case study of change for racial equity at LSCHS provides some details for making changes to address the racially based achievement gap among students.

Lake Shore Community High School began to address racial disparities by detracking freshman students. This paper studies that process. I hope to merge literature on the intersection of race and education, racial equity in education, successful leadership characteristics, and conditions for successful change for racial equity with on-the-ground experience at LSCHS. The question that this dissertation will answer is what are we learning about leadership and conditions for social change as we use detracking as a strategy to achieve racial equity?

Following the precepts of Critical Race Theory (CRT), race will be a critical dynamic in my research along with the use of personal narrative. Thus, my plan begins in sharing my own journey of racial consciousness and how I came to understand the need for racial equity at LSCHS and across the country.

As a person of color, I cannot talk about issues of race without talking about my father who helped me to develop my level of racial consciousness growing up. We had long discussions about school, politics, and power. Race and racism were threads that ran through many of those discussions at the dinner table, on long road trips to his home state of Mississippi, and in many chats on the front porch on long, humid Saturday afternoons. This same thread runs through this dissertation.
My father grew up in the rural South, and over the course of his life he was a part of the Great Migration to the North. The spectrum of racial ideology that he managed to construct during that time tends to hold true to many conversations about race today, some 70 years later. His life experience, which included his schooling, prompted his statement about not trusting the White man or not having total faith in “the system.” My Dad said to me, “Never trust the White man, because at the end of the day, he is White.” His statement, layered with my experiences in schools, is what leads me to this passion for a racially just educational system.

**Lake Shore Community High School: The Achievement Gap and Detracking**

My drive for racially just education brought me to LSCHS, a school with a long, rich history regarding its efforts to address the achievement gap. There, the Board of Education took up the cause and made a commitment to racial transformation at the school by writing and adopting the following equity statement:

**LSCHS School Board Equity Statement**

*LSCHS is committed to equity because excellence for all students requires equity.*
*This commitment will be achieved by:*

*Providing all students with access to resources, opportunities, supports, and interventions to ensure that they maximize their abilities and potential.*

*Giving students what they need, not necessarily equally, to meet their learning and well-being requirements.*

*Assuring that all LSCHS staff members, with deliberate effort, continue to examine and eliminate institutional beliefs, policies, practices, and teaching that perpetuate racial disparities in achievement.*

*Preparing all students to succeed in a multi-cultural, global society by teaching the contributions and viewpoints of all people in culturally relevant curricula.*

*Raising the achievement of all students while eliminating the racial predictability of achievement.*

Upon his arrival at LSCHS in 2006, the current superintendent was convinced that he needed to eliminate the racial predictability in student achievement, which would have
a significant impact on how the district placed students in classes. At the beginning of the 2010–11 school year, he began preparing the school and the community for a portion of the solution to this problem: to eliminate the straight-honors track for English and history at the ninth-grade level in freshman humanities. His recommendation would also include detracking biology to take place at a later time, a course that many students also take in ninth grade.

This was not the first plan to modify tracking at LSCHS, which has had mixed-level courses since the early 1990s. A mixed-level course allows for students who are taking a class for regular and honors credit to be in the same class with the same teacher at the same time. When appropriate, a regular-level student could move to the honors level without a disruption in schedule. With the class already being taught at the honors level, if a student demonstrated proficiency at the honors level, he or she would be moved to receive honors credit. In the name of equity, Black and Latino students, who are primarily trapped in regular-level classes, could enroll in a mixed-level course and move up to honors credit without a schedule change. The history department had detracked everything sometime in the 1980s. Many elective courses—all of Fine Arts, Career and Technical Education (which was Applied Science and Technology at the time), and PE—have always been mixed-level. In the beginning of the detracking process, mixed-level classes were expanded, but the straight-honors courses for students at the top of the class were kept intact.

As the Board of Education considered the superintendent’s recommendation, a noteworthy debate ensued, where parents and community members who expressed support for removing the honors-only course were countered by parents who
communicated their opposition to the elimination of the conventional honors track. The school had moved forward after a similar maneuver in 2008 to remove the homogeneous regular-level courses for a more heterogeneous grouping called “mixed level.” In fall 2010, LSCHS took the momentous step and moved to eliminate the honors-only track. On December 13, 2010, the LSCHS community members voted to eliminate the traditional honors model and design a system for incoming ninth graders to challenge themselves and earn honors credit. The conversation and controversy in 2010 sounded eerily similar to that of the fall of 2008, when LSCHS had increased mixed-level courses.

Lake Shore Community High School has been working for several years to collapse tracks within the ninth grade to allow more students of color access to a curriculum of high-level rigor. In previous years at LSCHS, students entered the school after having taken the EXPLORE exam, a standardized test marketed to help in academic planning for high school students. As incoming ninth graders, they were sorted based on their EXPLORE scores. Students were placed into lower-level English, history, or science courses, or they were placed in regular or honors sections of these courses.

Lake Shore Community High School has begun to move in the direction where the honors-level distinction is absent and the top honors-level course has been dismantled. All students entering LSCHS reading at or above grade level are now in the same class and are now required to earn honors credit based upon proficiency in reading, writing, and research. The previous model rewarded students who did well on the EXPLORE test by providing them an opportunity to be an honors student, giving them an additional .5 bump in their GPA. The data reveals that most of the students who were
given honors distinction were White. Students of color were placed in regular-level courses.

Lake Shore Community High School’s equity statement served as a precursor to the organization moving toward racial equity. It also illustrates one of the conditions that led to a perfect storm for social change at LSCHS: the statement’s passage and existence were preconditions for successful detracking. My interest in the equity statement is heightened in that most of the LSCHS board is White; this offers valuable insights into how leadership for change worked in this instance. In terms of my own narrative, this concept interrupted the refrain of my father’s statement in my ears. I began to wonder, how can White people, whom my father told me to never trust, be advocates for racial equity? My father would say, “At the end of the day, they are still White.” The narrative in my head had been to distrust White advocates for social justice, but the equity statement challenged that. I began to ask myself the following questions: Can Whites really advocate for a system that decentralizes their power? Can I trust their efforts? Will this work? I had many other questions as I read the board’s equity statement. Imagine how these questions became complicated when the school board also voted to detrack two classes at the freshman level. The school board’s vote to detrack exemplifies a step toward achieving its goal: reducing racial predictability in student achievement. It was a step that took courage and determination to implement.

**Studying Equity and Excellence at Lake Shore Community High School**

In order to set the context for the study, I have given a brief history of the recent measures LSCHS took to address its racial disparities in student achievement. In order to gain the insights derived from this endeavor, I have interviewed district and school
administrators on the leadership they displayed as the Board of Education voted unanimously to detrack the ninth grade. This includes interviews of department chairs and other administrators, school board members who had the courage to vote for the proposal, and it also includes the superintendent, who was the primary leader and advocate for eliminating the racial disparities at LSCHS.

I plan to use Critical Race Theory as a framework for discussion and analysis. Derek Bell, Richard Delgado, and Cheryl Harris are just a few Critical Race theorists who will help examine the lessons that emerge from this study. The literature suggests that many institutional forces contribute to the achievement gap, but tracking, being the primary force, plays a part in sustaining the gap. There is no way to address racial disparities without tackling the impact that tracking has had on race in schools (Lucas, 2006). The leadership lessons in this study emerge from this connection between racial equity and tracking and what LSCHS has learned regarding strong leadership that breaks this relationship. The LSCHS historical data is clear: the district has been able to predict a student’s academic proficiency by the color of his or her skin. The district also recognizes that there are large disparities with student reading scores, scores on standardized tests like the PSAE/ACT, disciplinary referrals, course selection, and failure rates. Due to the gross disparities in these numbers, LSCHS has taken a tremendous stride forward in the adoption of the racial equity statement and its work to detrack the ninth grade.

There are significant risks associated with addressing racial disparities within any context (Singleton, 2006). Due to the graphic, horrific, and troubled nature of racial history in the United States, many people are uncomfortable having conversations about race and racism. The conversation often gets clouded; people feel and often are
misunderstood, there are often varying degrees of anger and sadness, and there tends to be a lack of courage to confront how racial issues show up in today’s society. There is also an avoidance of how race impacts instruction and segregation each day of the school year. School leaders often ignore the intersection of race and pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995). My plan was to have courageous interviews with leaders—the department chairs, the superintendent, and school board members—regarding the leadership required to be a transformational leader for racial equity.

The demographic makeup for such discussions included adults over 18 years of age, both male and female, who hold interest in LSCHS. I asked participants to share their thoughts on the proposal. These LSCHS stakeholders received an e-mail from me, explaining the nature of the recent work in racial equity, and I asked for a brief one-hour interview regarding how the school had begun to address the needs of our students of color. We discussed their leadership lessons and their thoughts on detracking. I used their thoughts about leading change for racial equity to intersect with the literature on CRT. I talked with each board member who voted for the proposal to eliminate the straight-honors section in freshmen humanities (which includes all seven school board members), the superintendent, and the English and history department chairs. My interviewees were from various racial backgrounds: African-American, Caucasian, Hispanic, and Asian.

The literature review provides historical background for my study, particularly with regard to the many social and political factors which affect achievement scores of Black students. This is critical to establish before asserting that detracking is a viable response to the racially based achievement gap. At LSCHS, one can predict a student’s achievement based on race. I attribute that to tracking. In many schools with more
homogenous groups, the merits of a tracking debate are warranted (Gamoran, 1989). But an honest debate on the merits of ability grouping gets complicated when heterogeneous schools place the majority of Black and Brown students in lower-level classes, and those students also get lower scores on tools meant to determine track level placements (Gamoran, 1989). The conversation in these contexts has the potential to become more about race than about ability grouping, and many times, this conversation is many-sided. Many students of color are sorted and marginalized because they often have lower scores on measures that determine track-level placements. These students may come into elementary school behind, as they may not have had access to kindergarten; some teachers have lower expectations of students of color based on their own biases; in addition, the tools that determine placements do not adequately assess students’ learning or skills (Ferguson, 2007). This frame serves as a backdrop as I elucidate the leadership lessons school leaders learned as they moved to such a major and controversial policy shift in detracking. This work has proven to be controversial because affluent White parents want the best for their children, and some of those parents believe that if their children are placed with students who are not as intellectually advanced, classroom learning will be slowed down and their children will miss out on an opportunity for success (Kohn, 1998).

The literature concerning schools and social change lays out some proposed solutions and their implications for school structure and leadership. Detracking is one such possible solution. LSCHS has now begun to move in the direction where the honors-level distinction is absent and the top honors-level course has been dismantled. All students entering LSCHS who read at or above grade level are now in the same class and
are now required to earn honors credit based upon proficiency in reading, writing, and research. The previous model rewarded students who did well on the EXPLORE test by providing them an opportunity to be an honors student, giving them an additional .5 bump in their GPA. The data reveal that most of the students who were given honors distinction were White, while students of color were placed in regular-level courses. The LSCHS system remained inherently biased in that it rewarded honors students who happened to be White, while it inadvertently, or perhaps not so inadvertently, put Black and Brown students behind. The problem was the racial configuration apparent in placement and the racial identity of those who happened to be rewarded by the honors bump. This representation in the data reflects what happens in school districts all over the country. Adam Gamoran, Ron Ferguson, and Jeannie Oakes have written about this data for a long time. Yet, the practice of tracking remained intact in places like LSCHS and many other diverse schools around the country.

In this context, the leaders at LSCHS took a step in the process of systemic change for racial equity. Detracking has complex implications, particularly in a setting like that of LSCHS, where the community is invested in its self-image as exceptionally diverse and liberal. This self-image obscures the fact that the privileged in the community are White, and as in many communities, the privileged are the powerful. Community members often make or break educational policy at the school board level; they are the leaders who are most engaged in the political nature of school policy within the community (Kohn, 1998). At LSCHS, the superintendent and the school board took bold steps to detrack one grade level in the school. They faced community hostility and confrontation from those who had a stake in maintaining the status quo. Given the
adversarial nature of the proceedings, participants must have carefully reflected before tackling such an issue. This thoughtfulness and commitment to take action, and other characteristics of successful leadership for change, are borne out in interviews with participants. And as my father’s narrative frames my lens and I follow the direction of CRT, I wonder how the majority-White leaders approached such an issue and what all leaders learned from it?

This study highlights the leadership lessons that are linked to engineering this type of change. The superintendent and the school board chose to adopt a new policy. While doing this, the superintendent explicitly talked about the institutional racism perpetuated at LSCHS. He discussed the widespread practice of sorting students by standardized tests of ability, which indirectly sorted students by race. With disturbing frequency, White students were placed in honors-level courses and Black and Latino students were placed in lower-level tracks. His candid assessment of this practice made some uncomfortable, while others were relieved that a White man recognized that what was happening in the halls of LSCHS was a form of racism.

In addition to certain leadership qualities, a virtual perfect storm for racial change existed at LSCHS as it implemented detracking. Federally, No Child Left Behind legislation had required that student achievement scores be disaggregated by race, starkly illuminating the low achievement of students of color. Locally, LSCHS had attempted to address the issue; those attempts, though not successful, laid the groundwork for the later detracking of freshman humanities. At the time of this study, the former superintendent had retired and the current superintendent had been hired. Unlike many school districts, LSCHS had the resources to implement the changes.
There was federal regulatory momentum; there was local momentum; and there was the optimistic momentum resulting from the election of the first African American president of the United States. Racial change became the right thing to do at the right time.
CHAPTER 2: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

When studying racial equity and education, there are so many issues to consider, it would be easy to lose perspective. The literature on Critical Race Theory (CRT), introduced by Gloria Ladson-Billings to the field of education in 1995, helped those who studied schools understand U.S. educational racial disparities in a more dynamic way and has contributed insight and a tool for analysis to this study. Since then, there has been a proliferation in the literature in which many scholars use CRT to analyze, critique, and understand the racial phenomena happening in very diverse complex school systems, pushing us to always consider the impact of race. Gloria Ladson-Billings and Ron Ferguson also help us to understand why gaps in our schools exist and what schools can do to make sure that all students are receiving a quality education.

Critical Race Theory serves as the theoretical framework for my work. CRT emerges from Critical Legal Studies, through which legal scholars Derek Bell and Richard Delgado attempted to explain the racial disparities and racial silences in the U.S. legal record (2010). CRT has been one of the most influential frameworks since Dr. Ladson-Billings helped us understand how this framework can apply to educational research. Critical Legal Studies revealed how, due to systemic oppression by way of Jim Crow laws, the legal record was absent of Black voices in lawsuits and verdicts were disproportionately unfavorable against Blacks. Among other reasons for this was that Black people could not serve on juries; therefore, people of color could not have a representative jury of their peers. This engineered major disparities in Black versus White defendant convictions and grand jury investigations (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000).
With such wide disparities between the treatment of people of color and White people in the U.S. legal system, people of color were misrepresented in the law and under-protected by the law. Critical Legal Studies examined these phenomena as a way to explain such discrepancies. This same approach, through CRT, is now used to discover racial disparities in education. The educational system is meant to educate all kids. But schools are failing; they are failing to educate Black and Brown children, just as the law failed to serve people of color. CRT is the most appropriate theoretical framework in this discussion in that it is one of the few frameworks that deals explicitly with race. There is also a large body of research that uses CRT to examine educational practice and polity.

Derek Bell, Richard Delgado, and Cheryl Harris are the names of just a few Critical Race theorists who helped me build a lens to understand this phenomenon. CRT helps to provide a rigorous discussion about race in situations that have not considered it during discussions of student mobility, language, gender, and other socioeconomic forces that contribute to the achievement gap (Singleton, 2006). I am well aware that these elements play roles in the disparities seen in school data. Many scholars around the country are attempting to address the achievement gap, but as I understand it, while this is a racial achievement gap, few conversationalists want to have the “third-rail” conversation about race. Clearly, it is the most difficult discussion, due to this country’s achievement gap (Singleton, 2006). CRT helps to structure the discussion in making sure that power, history, and voice are addressed in the study.

In addition to CRT, a significant body of literature devoted to race equity in education has concerned itself with the intersecting impacts of race, poverty, isolation in school and society, and violence, not only on student during their years of schooling, but
also upon their life outcomes. In this context, detracking has been a topic for discussion amongst school leaders and researchers for the past 35 years. Detracking prompts discussion of instructional challenges, equity issues, and the negative impacts of the long-term life plans for students who are placed in lower-level tracks; the problems with life outcomes for students who were placed in lower tracks have been explored by many (Polk, 1983; Rosenbaum, 1980). The literature has told us that these students tend to end up incarcerated and are poorer earners in the economy. These students are also historically Black and Brown.

All of these researchers communicate the challenges to student achievement in how schools inherently and systematically marginalize students of color. A complementary body of literature addresses issues of leadership and transformational leadership. Without transformational leadership and change management, we cannot hope to take the data that has been generated concerning racial equity in education and engage the change process so that schools adequately educate all children.

In the question of closing the racially based achievement gap, many factors intersect and coexist. For this reason, some of the categories below are somewhat arbitrary, but to leave the body of literature uncategorized would have created a problematic lack of structure in my observations.

**The Tenets of Critical Race Theory: An Overview**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) and my father have formed much of my understanding of race. Derek Bell, Richard Delgado, and Cheryl Harris have played tremendous roles in developing this theory, which emerged from legal studies. The tenets of CRT are as follows:
1. Racism is a permanent force
2. Interest convergence
3. Whiteness is a form of property
4. The critique of liberalism
5. The power of counter-storytelling

These tenets were important in helping me to understand the social construction of race and institutional racism, as well as the impact of race in schools and to analyze how LSCHS is leading for racial equity (Delgado, 1995).

The first tenet of CRT is that racism is a permanent force in American society. CRT argues that racism cannot be eradicated, only explained and exposed. It must be assumed to be present in all contexts and situations.

CRT also rests upon the tenet of interest convergence. Interest convergence happens when the action of Whites benefits both Whites and people of color. For example, a Black athlete gets an opportunity to attend an all-White school on scholarship to play on its basketball team. The interest of the Black athlete is served because he gets to attend an elite school, and interests of Whites are furthered because they have talent on their athletic team, which is good publicity for the school and assists the school in having competitive sports programs (DeCuir, 2004). Interest convergence continues to serve institutional racism because it fails to address all of the systemic factors that lead to an overrepresentation of people of color at the margins of what are supposed to be inclusive systems. Interest convergence only allows for marginal or incremental gains for people of color who are habitually underrepresented in the ways that matters most in schools: track placement, grades, GPAs, standardized test scores.
Cheryl Harris established another tenet of CRT in her article, “Whiteness as Property” (2002). Harris argued that the law has favored Whites since the inception of our nation and allowed them to “grab,” to claim property and things for themselves. The initial laws in the United States gave Whites an advantage in negotiating and acquiring the space in society that benefited their racial group, while systematically disadvantaging Blacks and Native Americans. She argued a concept of Whiteness that comes with certain White attitudes, privileges, and perspectives, which are directly tied to how the group has been privileged in this country (Harris, 1993). White privilege is not having to think about race, so Whites internalize this normalcy, which means to their eyes, Whiteness is so pervasive that it is visible nowhere, while in fact it shapes our institutions and culture (Rothenberg, 2011).

In their critique of liberalism, CRT scholars supported a more activist and radical (in the sense of going for the root of a problem) approach to social change than liberalism, with its caution and its emphasis upon incremental change. The critique of liberalism takes a race-centered approach to equity and change. It relies upon political organizing to promote change, rather than the civil rights legal approach. Claiming that even White liberals can be racist or hold racist beliefs, this critique asks, if the system destroys lives, why change it incrementally, especially since incremental change has a tendency to be lost when it is implemented over time. The end result is more of the same (Lynn, 2013).

Counter-storytelling, another tenet of CRT, is the most powerful tenet, in that it offers a solution. This tenet proposes that students be provided with counter narratives, or a different story (or stories) to that portrayed about what it means to be Black and/or
Brown in the dominant culture. White students are not denied positive narratives of their race because they are the dominant group that makes up the majority of government, business, media, the arts, and so on. Students of color do not get opportunities to see their race positively portrayed in society. There are many success stories, but these narratives get hidden behind high incarceration, unemployment, and murder rates. White students consistently see themselves reflected positively in every field while Black and Brown students either do not see themselves reflected at all or see themselves portrayed as “problems” that need to be solved. In addition, during this study, during the interviews and in thinking about my father’s teachings, I couldn’t escape the importance of each of our personal narratives about race. In taking a stand and voting to detrack, board members were writing a new narrative or telling a counter-story.

Theresa Perry’s book, *Young Gifted and Black* (2003) is one example of providing a counter-narrative to students of color. CRT argues that exposing students to counter-narratives has more significance than any literacy program can ever muster. The idea of the counter-narrative communicates that Black and Brown students need to see reflections of themselves portrayed positively in the media, arts, education, and other aspects of mainstream society. The dominant narratives that these students see are those that are full of high rates of incarceration, poverty, and lackluster performance in schools. Perry argued that students of color need to see representatives of themselves as contributors to society, culture, and public service. This way, students of color can gain a sense of new possibilities for their lives.
Critical Race Theory in the Literature

The concept of Whiteness as Property goes to the fundamentally racist bias in the founding of our nation. It clarifies the power of race and explains the fierce resistance of White parents opposed to the move to detrack. Harris (1993) provided an analysis of how Whiteness (acting, thinking, and being White) developed as a racial construction which has evolved into a form of property (Whiteness owned by Whites and having value in society). Whiteness is characterized as being nowhere in that it can’t be defined, but everywhere in that it is the standard by which everything is judged. She argued that following slavery, Whiteness became the basis of racial privilege, which allowed Whites to benefit from societal systems, both public and private. She explained that the American legal system has protected White privilege and has an interest in Whiteness that has been demonstrated in litigation and court decisions. In other words, her article examined the correlations between race, privilege, and property.

In “Whiteness as Property,” Harris stated that the origins of property rights in America are rooted in racial domination. She wrote, “Even in the early years of the country, it was not the concept of race alone that operated to oppress Blacks and Indians; rather, it was the interaction between conceptions of race and property that played a critical role in establishing and maintaining racial and economic subordination” (p. 1716). Harris gave the historical context for her argument, in which she provided an exhaustive discussion of slaves as property and the seizure of Native American land as property.

CRT unpacks the pedagogy of opposition and cultural relevance. Given the resistance of those at LSCHS who moved to protect their Whiteness as Property, such
pedagogy is relevant. It is also relevant in its questioning of the underlying purpose and meaning of education. Pedagogical excellence is something noted scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings has discussed within a cultural context. She posited that culturally relevant pedagogy is a pedagogy of opposition, which rests on a set of criteria: students must experience academic success, students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order (1995). She stated that to be White means that one can count on being protected by the law. If a person were a slave, they were owned as property and had no legal rights. If one were Native American, the law allowed their property to be taken. The actions in the past of Whites acting under the concept of property foreshadow aspects of Whiteness in today’s society. Harris has provided a contemporary example of this by discussing why many Whites and the courts have taken issue with affirmation action.

A CRT approach can foster race equity change in the classroom. It can also guide school leaders as they attack institutional racism. Glenn Singleton used CRT as a working framework in his text *Courageous Conversations about Race* (2006). In one particular chapter, “How Anti-Racist Leaders Close the Achievement Gap,” Singleton and Curtis Linton outlined ways in which school leaders can attack institutional racism. They began their discussion with a conversation regarding White teachers being able to be culturally relevant with students of color. Such teachers must understand how students of color engage on a journey of racial identity construction within a White world; they must understand that White teachers have not had to construct their identities around race, which creates the possibility for misunderstanding and conflict. They also take on the
task of examining Black hyper-visibility within a White school and White invisibility within White space. In addition, they affirm Josh Aronson and Claude Steel’s work on “Stereotype Threat” (1997) and how these theories are illustrated within a White academic context and its deleterious effects on students of color.

Lastly, Singleton and Linton have discussed the theory that institutionalized White racism is supported by reverse White racism, internalized White racism, interracial White racism, and intra-racial White racism. They defined these terms, and within this discussion, used CRT as a theoretical framework to critique incremental change as a symptom of institutional racism. They went on to say that racial consciousness and anti-racist leadership among Whites are critical in de-centering Whiteness to finally bring about racial equity in diverse school settings.

As LSCHS has taken a significant step forward with the objective of closing the achievement gap for the sake of social justice, I find CRT helpful in understanding the dynamics involved. CRT has helped me answer these questions: What did we learn about leadership, and how do/will these leadership lessons stand up to the scrutiny of CRT? I am interested in how CRT helps us understand issues of race in education; this provides a foundation for the school leaders’ attempt to lead for racial equity. CRT is often used to understand or interpret racial achievement data and unpack the racial disparities in that data. In this case, CRT helped to provide a strong framework as I attempted to illuminate leadership lessons emerging from a race equity initiative.

CRT helped me structure my interviews. My goal was to uncover key principles on leading for equity that the LSCHS administration and school board were aware of, but were not aware of before taking on the effort to detrack. Having a vision, building buy-in
and capacity, and drafting and implementing a plan are all essential components of leadership. My expectation was that lessons on casting vision, sharing vision, gathering support, and building a plan would emerge from my conversations with district administrators, who were instrumental in this process. I also expected that what motivates leaders to initiate such a change would surface as LSCHS officials reflected on their votes in approval of the effort to detrack and their support for getting the superintendent’s recommendations approved. The tenets of CRT were embedded in the framework of the interview questions and are also reflected in the leadership lessons. These tenets were used as a basis for discussion as the interviewees reflected on leadership praxis.

Critical Race Theory also has ramifications for the collection and use of educational research data. Ladson-Billings spent time in her article “Toward a Critical Race Theory in Education” (1995) explaining that prior to CRT, educational research had little to no theoretical framework for dealing with issues of racial impact. She proposed that CRT serves as a means for collecting and interpreting educational research data, going into great detail about why a racialized approach is important to understanding education. Public schools are mostly failing students of color, while White students appear to be doing quite well. She used Jonathan Kozol’s book *Savage Inequalities* to frame her argument for why a racialized approach is necessary. She mentioned that many of the schools Kozol references in his text are urban schools attended by students of color.

Ladson-Billings provided a brief discussion of the etymological usage of the term “urban” and why it has a negative racial context, most often referring to students of color. She stated that the CRT tenet of counter-storytelling is a means to understanding what is
happening in schools and references Harris’s “Whiteness as Property” (another tenet of CRT) as being useful in understanding how Whiteness is affecting schools. Lastly, she critiqued incremental change and referenced interest convergence, both of which are also elements of CRT.

**Tracking v. Detracking**

At LSCHS, we made the decision to detrack based upon the assumption that this step would be beneficial for Black student achievement, and by inference, that Black student outcomes like college plans would be positively affected. In his article “Track Misperceptions and Frustrated College Plans: An Analysis of the Effects of Tracks and Track Perceptions in the National Longitudinal Survey” (1980), James Rosenbaum discussed the perceptions of students in high and low tracks and those perceptions’ subsequent effects on college plans. Rosenbaum referenced other studies that have discussed college placement and plans. He mentioned one study that found grades were far more important than tracking in college plans and attainments. He also cited his own study, in which he found that high school guidance counselors “treated students differently depending on the track classification students had been assigned” (p. 76). It appears that Rosenbaum’s discussion was motivated by the fact that most previous research on tracking had used students’ track perceptions as the indicator of the track, but if students misperceive their track (which, in this study, they do), researchers misconstrue the influence of tracking.

Rosenbaum discussed several factors that correspond with college plans. He briefly discussed race, sex, and social class, as well as track perceptions and misperceptions. He stated that race and sex influence college attendance during high
school years, but not in the transition from high school to college. He also mentioned that social class does not have as much influence as it does in the formation of the plans, although both are important. Rosenbaum rather profoundly states:

These findings also suggest that not only students’ plans, but also even their perceptions are sometimes faulty, and their faulty perceptions may contribute to their difficulty. The surprisingly modest correlation between track and track perceptions, which has already been stated, indicates that many students are misperceiving their tracks and calls into question students’ understanding of the phenomenon of tracking, which is having such an important impact on their careers (p. 81).

Rosenbaum said many students in lower-level tracks have misperceived their current academic standing. They hoped to attend and complete college, but became frustrated when they discovered their level of proficiency in these lower tracks impeded their entrance into college. Their misperceptions about their current tracks (in this particular study) were singularly the most influential factor that frustrated their college plans or aspirations. Rosenbaum stated that if students perceive they are in a college track and actually are not, the influence of that perception is almost as great as the influence of actually being in the college track. To some extent, perception seems to make college attendance happen.

Contrarily, in Rosenbaum’s regression analysis, he noted that regression coefficients and the percentages indicate “track perception raises college plans more often than it raises actual college attendance. Paradoxically, while increasing college attendance, track misperception also simultaneously increases the incidence of frustrated college plans” (p. 83). The actual track has a larger effect on college attendance than it does on track perceptions:

Moreover, because junior colleges account for a greater portion of the college attendance of these non-college-track students (37.9%) than of the college-track
students (20.4%), actual track has an even larger influence on attendance at four-year colleges than it has for all colleges. Although track misperception increases college attendance for some non-college-track students, perceptions do not permit all students to overcome the real obstacles created by their actual track positions. For these students, the clearest effect of misperceptions is higher plans and greater frustration. (Rosenbaum, p. 83)

It is sage to conclude that track perceptions and actual tracks are separate phenomena and have different effects. This raises new questions for future study about the role of guidance and the work counselors do as it relates to educating students concerning their college options. Why did counselors allow students to misperceive their tracks and allow them to hold on to excessively optimistic educational plans? In an ideal world, a student’s track would be identical with his or her postsecondary plans. These results suggest students’ plans are closely associated with their post-high-school plans and that tracking (for some) actually frustrates their plans. Rosenbaum’s findings do not completely repudiate tracking, but they do take a bit of the logic away from its advocates. It is clear if these students were aware of the implications of their tracks, they would either revise their plans or alter their tracks. Rosenbaum said that “gross coercion is not required to keep students in lower tracks, misinformation is sufficient to make students voluntarily choose to remain in tracks which will ultimately frustrate their college plans” (p. 83).

In his article, “If Tracking is Bad, is De-Tracking Better?” (1980), Rosenbaum reported on a study of interviews with 10 social studies teachers about student proficiencies in the detracked setting at Progressive High School, a suburban public high school in the Midwest which is identical to LSCHS. Rosenbaum addressed an issue that is important at LSCHS: Can the needs of all students be met in a detracked classroom? The study found that detracking was well implemented (although I take issue with this
assessment because teachers were not trained to differentiate lessons, and this may well explain why the needs of students in the academic middle were met more adequately), and teachers were enthusiastic to detrack. A plan was written to implement over a four-year time frame. Once the program was in place, teachers encountered three unanticipated outcomes: irresolvable conflicts, a uniformity that deprived faster students of challenge and slower students of mastery, and doubts about the legitimacy of the class, which both teachers and students faced. The report also notes that teachers were not given any professional development in how to teach detracked classes.

Rosenbaum reported that students in the academic middle are the ones who happen to be impacted the most, since these students faced more peer pressure to do well in a detracked setting while teachers answered fewer of their questions. A section of the report noted that minority students were impacted the most because they faced pressure from other minority students who were not doing well in the class. The author offered no solution, instead leaving the reader with a conundrum: what can actually work in both a tracked and detracked setting?

Samuel Lucas and Mark Berends, in their article “Race and Track Location in U.S. Public Schools” (2006), discussed the demographics of high- and low-level classes in which students—Black, Latino, or White—are represented at each level and the inequities with which those demographics are associated. They offered insights into the questions of academic access which were so important at LSCHS. They cited research regarding the achievement gap between Black and White students. These inequalities are due to curricular locations and cognitive development among these students. The authors mentioned that “one might posit that racial differences in access to a challenging
curriculum might play a role in the racial gap in measured achievement” (p. 170). This conclusion is ambiguous and may not offer answers to the situation at my high school.

The factors that determine the inequities in education go beyond the concern of test scores to encompass racial inequity with income, socioeconomic status, and life proficiency in a larger context. Those who study these disproportions link the disparity in the labor market to pre-labor skill and cognitive advancement. Lucas and Berends looked into the effects that tracking would have on cognitive achievement. It is interesting that the authors suggested that the findings on race and curricular location vary. Oakes (1985) found that Black and Latino/Latina students were more likely to be assigned to vocational and remedial classes. Lucas and Gamoran (2002) found a Latino/Latina disadvantage, but no Black-White difference in college pre-track assignment for sophomores.

The authors discussed five factors that might determine racial and ethnic differences in curricular location in schools: school poverty, governance, faculty sponsorship, a legacy of conflict, and racial/ethnic diversity. One analysis concluded that impoverished schools might lack important resources for both pedagogy and curricular placement. One case study found that 52 percent of classes in low-income schools in California met college-prep requirements, while 63 percent of classes in affluent schools met college-prep requirements. In addition, regardless of class, Blacks and other darker-skinned groups are more likely to reside in racially-segregated neighborhoods and schools:

Further, given the presence of racial segregation, neighborhoods of Blacks are more likely to be impoverished than neighborhoods of other groups owing to, if nothing else, historic redlining that has undercut the property values of Black neighborhoods, old and new. If funding for schools is connected to neighborhood resources, and poor schools have fewer opportunities for their students to take college prep courses, it is quite possible that racial/ethnic differences in college
preparatory course-taking can be traced to differences in the resources available at the different schools students attend (Gamoran).

Lucas and Berends also mentioned that Black and White teachers see student performance differently. Teachers of opposite races not only interpret student performances differently, but they literally see different performances of the students or the racial composition of teachers in a school, which may affect the placement of students. It is also stated that many Whites see Black inequality as a result of laziness, while Blacks see Black inequality as a result of racism.

Lucas and Berends’ data illustrates that Whites in racially diverse schools crowd comparable Blacks out of the college preparatory curriculum. This question is developed further in the section on racially inclusive v. racially isolated schools, below. It is noted that tracking is a force for segregation in diverse schools. Within these contexts, school personnel may be pressured by White parents and, in response, place White students ahead of Black students in higher-level courses. On the contrary, Blacks are more likely to take advanced courses in less diverse schools. However, some may suggest that although the courses are high-level, the quality of these courses in predominantly Black schools is low.

Lucas and Berends explicitly stated that a legacy of racism is the cause for inequity in schools or districts with a history of racial tension and conflict. This is important for this study, because it affirms the critical role of race in the achievement gap, an affirmation of the direction taken at LSCHS.

Segregation in U.S. schools makes it difficult for Black students to experience demanding courses. Talented Black students face a challenging path to enroll in advanced courses in diverse settings, a fact which accounts for the gap in cognitive achievement in
many cases. Later labor-market disparities can be traced to this inequity.

It is interesting to see parallels to the practice of tracking or segregated education involving other racial groups outside the United States. In the article “Region, Locality Characteristics, High School Tracking and Equality in Access to Educational Credentials: The Case of Palestinian Arab Communities in Israel” (1998), Andre Elias Mazawi examined the relative effects of regional and local characteristics on tracking and the credentialing patterns within Arab localities in Israel. Researchers believed that unequal opportunity structures served as mechanisms actively maintained by the state, which reproduced broader social, economic, and political inequalities between Palestinian Arabs and Jews.

Mazawi highlighted the structure of educational opportunities in Arab localities in Israel. He said the Arab school system in Israel is academically oriented. Less than 33 percent of the pupils study in the vocational tracks within the Arab system, compared with slightly more than 50 percent in the Hebrew system. Some researchers suggest such a restructuring of the school experience enhances the allocation of more Arab students to academic postsecondary education, compared with students of different backgrounds.

Mazawi concluded that access to credentials was affected differently in and by several variables. In his study, gender played a significant role in determining educational access. He noted that tracking was not found significantly and directly to affect the acquisition of educational credentials. In this study, tracking does not play a significant role in the attainment of credentials, but it has much more of an influence on gender access and visibility in the local high school system. The data illustrate that the larger the school, the more internal gender stratification, as boys’ enrollment intensifies in the
vocational tracks. At the same time, in smaller schools, where less tracking takes place, high school selectivity is higher and academic tracks are less accessible to girls. The educational attainment of both gender groups is determined by the “context of the schooling process: locality, population size, tracking patterns, and class density” (Mazawi, p. 236). In this study, tracking does not play a significant role in the attainment of credentials, which is conditional upon many factors, including region, race, and the socioeconomic status of the locality.

**Racially Inclusive v. Racially Isolated Schools**

What are the day-to-day experiences of Black students in racially inclusive classrooms and schools as opposed to racially isolated ones? What are the differences in resources and structure between the two types of school experience? Are there differences in student outcomes between the two?

Beverly Daniels Tatum’s chapter “The Re-Segregation of our Schools and the Affirmative Identity” in her book *Can We Talk about Race* (2008) took on the question of segregation and re-segregation, which is the flip side of equitable academic access and reminds me that the fight for racial equity in schools has a long history. The original *Brown* decision was weakened by *Brown II*, and subsequently, by other federal legislation challenging integration. She discussed in particular *Milliken v. Bradley* and *Board of Education of Oklahoma City v. Dowell*, which collectively slowed and, in some cases, reversed the trajectory of public school integration.

Tatum provides her readers with both a historical and economic context in which the effects of re-segregation have impacted schools, as well as an analysis of how *Brown v. Board of Education* impacted students of color. Following *Brown*, in southern school
districts, Black teachers and administrators were displaced and replaced by White teachers and administrators, causing the loss of Black models of academic achievement for young Black students. White teachers were forced to teach Black students. *Brown* forced environments where White female teachers shared dysfunctional relationships with students based on fear, ignorance, mistrust, and resentment.

A final consequence of the integration of schools was that the former curriculum in Black schools had reflected various cultural dimensions that played a large role in the identity development of many African American students. Tatum asked a very important question: “Is there a relationship between the invisibility in the curriculum and the underachievement of Black and Latino students?” (p. 29). She argued that the curriculum in most integrated schools did not aid in affirming the identity development of students of color. Schools need curricula that help students create stories that “resonate with their best hope for themselves” (p. 31).

Gary Lafree and Richard Arum, in their article “The Impact of Racially Inclusive Schooling on Adult Education Incarceration Rates Among U.S. Cohorts of African-Americans and Whites Since 1930” (2006), drew a correlation between racially inclusive schools and incarceration rates, particularly in the case of Black students. The authors posed two research questions: First, do Blacks educated in states and birth cohorts with higher proportions of White students in public schools experience lower rates of incarceration as adults? Second, has the strength of the connection between school-based racial inclusiveness and incarceration rates for Blacks increased over time? The authors argued that racial isolation in schools has a negative impact on the success of African American students, which in turn has been linked to poverty and crime.
The authors have confessed that there has been no longitudinal study that directly links racial isolation, like tracking, to crime and incarceration, but they argued that the consequence is likely. On the other end, racial integration has had a long-term benefit for Black people in the labor market. “Black children attending racially heterogeneous settings have higher, more realistic occupational aspirations, and they eventually secure higher paying jobs” (Lafree). The authors argued for more racial grouping in schools, along with the elimination of tracking and other isolating policy measures. They were also clear to point out that all-Black schools in urban areas had a negative impact on Black students, as those schools were underfunded and had less-qualified teachers.

Lafree and Arum discussed the link between racially inclusive schools and incarceration rates among African Americans. They stated, “We could not identify any study to date that has directly examined connections between the racial isolation of African Americans in schools and their subsequent incarceration rates.” There has always been anecdotal data and a common understanding in the African American community that if one does not do well in school, her or she would end up in jail.

Sociological research has concluded that there are higher numbers of African American families in poverty and, therefore, African Americans would experience the negative effects of poverty, like incarceration, in higher percentages. This article is particularly important in the discussion of tracking at LSCHS and elsewhere, in that school placement has been a way to sort students into racially segregated learning environments. Lafree and Arum only addressed racially inclusive schools. The authors examined whether African Americans currently living in one state would face similar incarceration rates if they were educated in another state.
Lafree and Arun concluded that Black students who were educated in schools with more White counterparts experienced lower rates of incarceration as adults. They stated, “As a consequence, a student moving from a predominantly Black school to a predominately White school is usually moving from a school of concentrated poverty with many social and educational shortcomings to a school with radically different peer climates that are associated with a greater likelihood of a positive student orientation toward college and obtaining a desirable job” (p. 76).

There is no doubt that a student who attends schools with higher concentrations of poverty faces many challenges. In addition, when a student begins to attend a school with a positive culture, he or she performs better and more than likely has a positive life trajectory. But there is something troubling about Lafree and Arum’s findings. There appears to be a supposition that Black students face a positive peer culture and a better life when they attend schools with Whites. It seems as if Whiteness is the brand of success that rescues Black children from incarceration and economic instability.

One could suggest that a Black student who leaves a poverty-concentrated school and then attends a predominantly middle-class Black school would do just as well as a Black student who attends a mixed-race school. It is clear the culture of economic stability represents success, not the culture of White schooling. The authors alluded to notions of Whiteness as the ultimate positive for students of color in poverty-concentrated schools, but did not state it explicitly.

Black students who attend schools located in high-poverty areas experience low levels of competition, peer pressure against academic achievement, and low expectations from teachers. In addition, the authors stated that racial isolation has been shown to
negatively affect achievement and success, resulting in crime and incarceration. Once again, the authors linked poor performance and expectations to racial dynamics, and not to economic conditions. On the contrary, racial integration in schools has been linked to successful completion of high school and college (p. 77).

Lafree and Arun stated, “Blacks who attended racially integrated schools are more likely to attend college. Similarly, it has also been shown that controlling test scores and attendance at more racially integrated high schools greatly increases the probability that Black students will finish college” (p. 77). In other words, Black students who attended racially integrated schools graduated from high school, went to college, graduated from college, and got white-collar jobs. Racial integration has long-term labor-market return benefits for Blacks, but sadly, many Blacks and Latinos experience a degree of racism within those schools.

Other studies have shown that Black high school seniors who attended desegregated schools were more likely to enter professional occupations. As a matter of fact, Black students in racially inclusive settings have higher aspirations, and therefore secure higher-paying jobs. The authors concluded that racial inclusiveness reduces incarceration rates for African Americans, but is there any reason to believe the strength of this association has increased over time?

The authors pointed out that conditions in the educational climate of schools, particularly African American schools, have deteriorated. “Although the impact of these changes on crime and imprisonment has not been directly assessed, there is both ethnographic and quantitative evidence supporting the conclusion that the educational climate of predominately Black schools has seriously eroded over time” (p. 79). Many
African American students who attended Black schools prior to desegregation speak of high expectations and a culture of high achievement.

Conversely, after desegregation, that culture of high achievement and high expectations began to erode. Currently, many Black schools in high-poverty areas do not possess such a culture. Lafree and Arum concluded their findings with an important question: “Why do Black students seem to have more of a positive life outcome when they have more White classmates?” They suggested that Black students adopt the values of their White classmates and therefore experience a better life. These conclusions are interesting, at best. Once again, the authors make the suggestion that Black students benefit from White culture and White values.

The most provocative question is, why are education rates lower for those Blacks who faced segregation before the Civil Rights Movement than for those who attended racially isolated schools, relative to more integrated schools in more recent decades? It has been said that “Black schools after the 1960s are more likely to face an educational climate with more disorder, a lower commitment to learning, and less effective school disciplinary practices” (Lafree 2006). This maintains a strong argument for detracking on several levels. Blacks and Whites that learn in the same classroom have much to gain from each other. This article discusses racially inclusive schools, yet in integrated settings, classrooms must also be racially inclusive. The dynamics of tracking in integrated settings sort and segregate students by achievement, which ends up racially exclusive. This article supports racially inclusive schools and racially inclusive classrooms.

In her article “School Tracking and Student Violence” (2000), Lissa Yogan
offered a compelling sociological analysis, linking the effects of tracking to school violence and other delinquent behaviors. She discussed the concern among parents regarding the rise in school violence in the 1990s. She noted that the nation considered school violence a crisis when White, middle-class, suburban teens became the main suspects associated with tragic school massacres. There was an increase in school security measures, such as metal detectors, security guards, and security tools.

Furthermore, Yogan suggested that school leaders ignored the role the organization of the school itself plays in school violence.

Yogan’s approach, which drew upon the study of personality development, was unique. She said, “I will begin by reviewing several theories and concepts that underlie the process of self-development. Understanding how a person grows and develops and understanding how a school’s structure may influence a person toward violent behavior can suggest organizational changes that will ultimately result in decreased use of violence” (p.109). Yogan began to discuss the theory of symbolic interactionism, which is based on the assumption that meaning and learning are gained through interaction with others. How a person understands others, how others come to understand that person, and how the person comes to understand and identify himself or herself are parts of symbolic interactionism.

Yogan suggested that perception and meaning play roles in interactions. Using this theory to understand teacher-student interaction, teachers will act toward students based on the significance students have for them. In addition, the meaning this has for the teachers will be based on the social interaction teachers have with their self-identified social counterparts (p. 110). Lastly, symbolic interactionism suggests that teachers
change their socially constructed meanings. Teachers and students should adopt a change in belief systems. This is important because students and teachers identify themselves as part of different groups: professional organizations, communities, families, athletic organizations, and religious and ethnic groups.

Yogan explained that when these groups collide, teachers and students act as members of two or more social groups. This has a higher tendency to occur when teachers and students are not of the same social class and when teachers and students are of different racial backgrounds. Yogan observed that schools are caste systems which tend to be socially and academically irreversible through the practice of tracking.

Yogan’s article also clarified the pedagogical implications of tracking by stating that if instruction is not socially compatible, students disengage from learning. This becomes increasingly problematic because “students with a history of violence and violent ways of thinking rationalize violence into all their interactions. They may interpret some actions through this way of thinking” (p. 112). A teacher who is not from a violence-filled community may not understand the lens through which a student perceives interactions. Yogan goes on to say the student’s experience needs to be changed. This cannot happen if students are not grouped heterogeneously.

Students who do not share the teacher’s background are less likely to be influenced by the class or the institution. In other words, the lack of a student bonding with a societal institution like school can lead to deviant behavior and more serious forms of rule violation. Yogan observed, “Violence that results in death is an extreme form of deviance” (p. 112). When students have bonded with an institution, they are less likely to act in deviant ways. Tracking is one policy that inhibits interracial bonding amongst
students. When teachers and students are different, it takes more of an effort to bond.

Yogan cited many of the problems associated with tracking, with which most educators agree. Theoretically, tracking is supposed to be good for all students, as it creates supposedly beneficial academically homogeneous classes. In actuality, tracking reinforces negative stereotypes of Black and Latino/a children. Teachers teach to the bottom and not to the top of those classes. Students in lower-level tracks have poor perceptions of themselves, teachers have low perceptions of those students, and these tracks mirror socioeconomic status. There are profound pedagogical differences in higher- and lower-level tracks. Students who are labeled educationally inferior or superior meet those expectations. It can be stated that students in the lower tracks are less likely to bond with the school, and therefore could be more prone to deviant behavior.

Additionally, Yogan makes a profound educational observation, which exemplifies the nature and scope of what public education should be when she says: “If students form bonds with other students who are similar to them, they are not as likely to diversify and expand their thinking as are students who bond with students who are dissimilar to them. Our knowledge grows as our range of experiences, both vicarious and real, grow” (p. 114). As our experiences change, we re-evaluate what we have previously concluded. Stagnant thinking is not the goal of education. The problem is that tracking reinforces positive White-group norms as well as negative Black-group norms.

This creates a deficiency in the building of self-esteem that has been linked to student achievement. Self-esteem works through group identification, yet all people need positive evaluation by others and the self; tracking chips away at that for many students of color. Yogan cited the study of John Ogbu, who discussed the burden of acting White
for students of color. She said: “The ideology within this culture academically is to become ‘White.’ Thus, within some groups that are relegated to the lower tracks, the need for positive interaction is to embrace a culture that is counter-intuitive to the culture that one already exists” (p. 116). Therefore, students in lower-level tracks have more of a challenge in overcoming the negative effects of schooling.

Yogan concluded her article by stating that tracking reinforces isolation and separation. Although the direct relationship between tracking and delinquency remains unclear, tracking contributes to delinquency on a general level. She stated that schools should play the same roles as they did when they were created—to socialize individuals to live peaceably in society. In recent American history, schools were effective at socializing immigrants. Schools took those who were seen as less than and created an equal opportunity for those who wanted a piece of the American dream. American schools were able to achieve such success with heterogeneous grouping. Schools must come back to a place where there is an equal-opportunity playing field for all students.

Kenneth Polk, in his article “Curriculum Tracking and Delinquency: Some Observations” (1983), confirmed the intuitive understanding that there is a link between lower-level tracks and delinquency. The strong relationships between schooling variables and delinquency have been firmly established. Polk supported the body of research by drawing the link that delinquency can be traced to the strong influences of middle school on students. He noted, “The tracking variable is one of the few which is treated as dichotomy so that attenuation might be exposed to further reduce the apparent impact of tracking when compared with other variables defined in interval form” (p. 282).

It appears that students in lower-level tracks are more likely to engage in
delinquent behavior. As a matter of fact, Polk went on to mention that deviant behavior is associated with the junior high and high school experiences. In most cases, in schools where there were tracks, students in lower-level tracks were less engaged, experienced low expectations, and, therefore, were more prone to delinquent behavior. In addition, “Much of the literature which focuses on tracking has been concerned with the theoretical question of how social differentiation and stratification within the school is to be conceptualized” (p. 284).

Polk summed up the brief article by acknowledging that tracking, grades, attachment, and self-esteem are interrelated, and negative schooling experiences are significantly correlated with delinquency. As school practices contribute to social reproduction and the perpetuation of the status quo, Polk’s article confirms that tracking is a part of schooling that contributes to incarceration. If schools were to begin to detrack and expose all students to high-level expectations, that would begin to address the disturbingly high levels of delinquent behavior and incarceration.

Ron Ferguson, a prominent Harvard University researcher, supports the premises underlying detracking at LSCHS: assume no racially based motivational differences among students; differences may be based on different skill levels; and access to resources must be equitable. He adds one element: emotional support and encouragement are necessary.

Ferguson did not discuss CRT, but his chapter “What Doesn’t Meet the Eye: Understanding and Addressing Racial Disparities in High-Achieving Suburban Schools” (2007) in Towards Excellence and Equity provided an analysis of data collected by the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN), a network of school districts in 11
states with similar disparities in racial achievement data and student socioeconomic demographics. The research project was entitled, “Ed Excel Assessment of Secondary School Student Culture.” The data presented by Ferguson has implications for racial achievement. The survey was given to 15 MSAN districts, in which superintendents and other district leaders had attempted to understand the racial achievement gap in their schools and districts. Ferguson, a part of the research project, provided a statistical analysis of survey results. He was also responsible for helping districts make practical sense of how the data was to inform policy and practice. Ferguson noticed patterns in GPAs, socioeconomic predictabilities in achievement, hard work, motivation, homework completion, and the understanding of content.

The MSAN survey concluded that students of color reported having fewer background advantages (family, education, and privilege) on average compared to White students. They have lower grade-point averages and report less understanding of class content. Students of color also have lower homework completion rates, but when homework is actually done by these students, the report indicates that they spend the same amount of time on homework as White students. In addition, the survey indicated that skill gaps were apparent and that students of color had less at-home academic support, which were two of the reasons students completed less homework and got lower grades than Whites. The survey showed there were no gaps reported in effort or motivation with students of color in comparison with White students.

Ferguson offered a few recommendations for policy and practice: (1) Assume no racially based motivational differences; (2) Address specific skill deficits; (3) Supply ample encouragement routinely; and (4) Provide access to resources and learning
experiences. Ferguson also referenced the “Tri-Pod Project,” in which he outlined that teachers need ongoing professional development in building relationships, content, and pedagogy. In upper-middle-class suburbs, these three components go hand-in-hand in stimulating the ambition of both White learners and students of color. Such professional development could be key to the long-term success of detracking at LSCHS.

**Whiteness as Property in the Schools**

Alfie Kohn conducted another MSAN research study: “Only for My Kid: How Privileged Parents Undermine School Reform” (1998). The article provided a stimulating discussion around the factors that cause White middle-class parents to not support, and in some cases, destroy school reform for the students expected to benefit from the reform—struggling students of color. The article opens with a story of how both a principal and superintendent were forced out of their positions for wanting to move the curriculum to a performance-based curriculum instead of a more traditional rote memorization-driven curriculum. The new curriculum would have had more of an emphasis on problem solving, which would have been good for all students. The community mobilized and elected members to the school board, which ultimately killed the initiative and cost the superintendent and principal their jobs.

Those parents who mobilized to eliminate certain school-reform initiatives were described as “upper-class, high-achieving parents, who feel that education is competitive, that there shouldn’t be anyone else in the same class as my child; and we shouldn’t spend a whole lot of time with the have-nots” (p. 569). These parents were not concerned that all children learn; they were only concerned that their children learn. These parents realized that the system was working for their children and, therefore, why should it
change? The article also cited a study in which many White liberal mothers talked about their commitments to equity and tolerance in educational settings. However, when it came to the advantages they believed their own children should receive, they became more passionate and dismissed those previous ideals.

The article “Do Increased Levels of Parental Involvement Account for Social Class Differences in Track Placement?” (2004) by Sean Kelly discussed whether increased levels of school involvement among socially advantaged parents account for their children’s advantage in track placement in public schools. The research community has given little room to doubt that American schools play an important role in reproducing social status from one generation to the next. Kelly stated, “Despite massive educational expansion in efforts to equalize the between-school differences in educational opportunity through desegregation legislation, the relative effects of social class on educational attainment have changed little” (p. 626). One explanation of this phenomenon is attributed to the “differentiation of students” in schools that is counterproductive to social attainment. Kelly argued that tracking sorts students into different courses based on prior academic performance, but tracking is not the only indicator that reflects academic achievement. The manifestations of social attainment of students—self-esteem, educational aspirations, friendship patterns, participation in extracurricular activities, and the acceptance or rejection of school as a positive value—are other indictors. The article asserted that tracking reinforces inequalities that occur in early years of schooling. Due to the large gap in educational attainment within social classes, tracking reinforces these distinctions. In high school, tracking is based on standardized test scores and academic grades, which may not reflect ability.
Research has long noted that students from higher social classes are typically White and are placed in higher-level courses, while students from underprivileged backgrounds tend to be placed in lower-level tracks. Kelly attempted to discover which aspects of schooling contribute to social reproduction. He took a comprehensive look into parental involvement in placement decisions. In other words, can parental involvement account for track placement, and if so, to what extent? Kelly said, “Decisions, actions, and influence by parents during this process may have effects that last throughout the year. The track-placement process during entry into high school often generates four years of unequal learning environments. Parental involvement at this stage can pay dividends throughout for students who are typically White (p. 628). The assumption is that if middle-class parents are able to maneuver through and around school policies to place their children into higher-level tracks, these actions could contribute to class production. The tragic element of these actions is that students in poverty-concentrated, socially constricted environments never get the opportunities of middle-class students. In the end, low-achieving, poor students consequently suffer from the negative effects of poverty, crime, and punishment. The American education system is supposed to be the great equalizer, but in large part, it continues to function as a state apparatus of social reproduction that propels the poor into prison and prepares others for the marketplace.

Kelly highlighted other studies hypothesizing that highly educated parents may intervene to override the school’s placement decisions, irrespective of the students’ performance. Other studies concluded that educated, middle-class parents possess insider knowledge that gives them an edge in working in or around school policies. The same study also reported, “Social status is an important resource in dealing with school
personnel, so much so that teachers and administrators in middle-class communities often struggle to maintain professional autonomy. Middle-class social networks give middle-class parents an advantage (2004).” Kelley expounded that, on a basic level, students of higher social class have a huge advantage in attaining placement in the higher-level courses, especially in math. Students of parents with advanced degrees were five times more likely to be placed in higher-level math courses than students whose parents did not attend college (p. 647). Kelly also found that many middle-class students were able to move to higher-level courses because they actually attended schools where more courses were offered.

Kelly makes a fascinating and jaw-dropping point that his research found no support for the hypothesis that students of “higher social class have an advantage in math sequence placement because their parents are directly involved in the placement process” (p. 647). This is contrary to what he predicted or anticipated. Parental involvement had no effects on placement, but he makes an important distinction in that parental involvement is important to school success.

Susanne Bohmer’s article, “Teaching Privileged Students about Gender, Race, and Class Oppression” (1991) offered a unique perspective on how to discuss equity with students of privilege. This study offered recommendations on how to teach upper-middle-class students about oppression and the struggles of oppressed groups. The article also discussed the connection between marginalized groups and included a discussion of how to get teachers and students engaged in regular dialogue about issues related to power in society. As systems begin to change and become more equitable, interactions like these become more commonplace and critical. These conversations are also important in
districts or schools where there is a pronounced achievement gap and other elements of systemic challenges to students of color.

The article went on to define oppression in the classroom, discuss the institutional aspects of oppression, and examine individual aspects of oppression. The objective of such schooling (asking teachers and students to talk about systemic oppression) is to help students become more conscious of oppression and to render society a more equitable place for all.

Bohmer did not explicitly address CRT, but the ideas presented in this article were similar to the ideas of Jessica DeCuir and Adrienne Dixon in “So When It Comes Out, They Aren’t That Surprised it is There: Using Critical Race Theory as a Tool of Analysis of Race and Racism in Education” (2004). This article followed the experience of two African American students (one male, one female) at Wells Academy, a predominantly White private school. The authors used these students’ experiences to explain the tenets of CRT and use CRT as a means to explain the experiences of these two students in an all-White school. Both students shared their stories and offered explanations of their racialized experiences at Wells Academy. The authors gave a brief history of the origins of CRT and its recent application to the field of education (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

**Accountability and Race Equity in the Schools**

Accountability can make it possible to evaluate the effectiveness of detracking in closing the achievement gap. In the article “The War on Schools: NCLB, Nation Creation and the Educational Construction of Whiteness” (2007), Leonardo Zeus highlighted the challenges with NCLB, as it presupposes that if students of color were to work harder and
if teachers were to actually do their jobs and teach, then all students would be able to
achieve. Zeus pointed out that NCLB assumes the system is fair and does not take into
account the other systemic disparities that have an effect on student achievement,
including access to health care and family economic accomplishment. Zeus also provided
an eloquent discussion of Whiteness, and how the parameters of NCLB reflect
Whiteness, which is itself racist. He also offered a thorough argument defining Whiteness
and its presence in the construction and implementation of NCLB.

Zeus said that NCLB fails to “acknowledge the causal link between academic
achievement and the racial organization of society ... this is vintage Whiteness” (p. 265).
He posits that Whiteness is present within the fabric of NCLB in that it is missing 21
billion dollars in funding and, by design, creates ineffective schools with large
demographics of non-White groups. Schools and students are deemed responsible for
doing better without money or the acknowledgement of systemic barriers to achievement.
In summary, NCLB rewards White students and their schools, while it punishes schools
of color. The NCLB data also inherently reveal that White students do better in school
than students of color. He argues that NCLB is a consequence of Whiteness.

In the short article “Closing the Achievement Gap: The Best Strategies of the
Schools We Send them to” (2007), Pedro Noguera highlighted some of the best-practice
strategies in helping schools, which demonstrate the achievement gap between White
students and students of color. He focused on a few schools that are dedicated and
deliberate in their approach to the students they serve. But he also mentioned there is
much more going on than that. These schools also exhibited a commitment to engaging
parents as partners in education; had strong instructional leadership focused on a coherent
program or curriculum; provided instruction that teachers support and follow; demonstrated a willingness to evaluate interventions and reforms to ensure quality control; recognized that disciplinary practices must be linked to educational goals and must always try to reconnect troubled students to learning; and showed a commitment to finding ways to meet the non-academic needs of poor students. These strategies all have an enormous impact on student success.

**Transformational Leadership**

The literature in change management says that organizations should reflect on their values and make necessary changes as times and the needs of people evolve. Tony Wagner, in his book *Change Leadership* (2005), offered that change is necessary but not easy. There are leadership traits or characteristics that facilitate managing the change process. Detracking in a school like LSCHS, which at one point in its history was very proud of its tracks, would classify as a type of change that demands transformational leaders. The literature is clear in that it highlights the need for involving stakeholders, communicating a clear vision and being adaptable, and that a leader must a good listener and take into account various stakeholders’ concerns. Other texts like *Leadership on the Line* by Ron Heifiz, *The Six Secrets of Change* by Michael Fullan, and *Resonant Leadership* by Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee reflect these elements of managing the change process.

The challenge with this aspect of the literature is that there is little that discusses managing change based on race. There is literature that documents historical figures who managed, through protests and court challenges, to change this nation based on racial injustice. However, there is little scholarship that discusses managing the actual change
process as it relates to racial justice. The literature is clear about what happens when leaders choose to listen to various stakeholders as they manage the change process and hear that the values of those stakeholders don’t match the leaders’ or the organization’s values, resulting in the need to create “buy-in” and a voice for all involved in the process. But the literature does not address what happens when those values are racist. How can people empathize with a person’s racism or their refusal to acknowledge the marginalized feelings of those who are oppressed? One can learn from the actions of those in the past but the literature does not address how to manage the change process or engage in systems thinking (Senge, 1990). Most notably, the literature does not provide guidance in promoting change as it relates to race, racism, power, privilege, and shifting systems from the powerful to the disempowered. Paolo Freire, in his book *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, discusses the consciousness of the oppressed in becoming liberated, but there is no how-to guide to change systems that either are racist or are dealing with people with racist ideologies and pathologies that systematically hurt others.

**Conclusions**

This review highlights literature on the need for equitable policies in education. The current school models and practices do not seem to work for a large proportion of students of color, including those at LSCHS. Encouraged by the tenets of CRT and lessons from my father, I cannot help but ponder some sort of social conspiracy. Our capitalist structure is predicated on those who have and those who have not. Could it be our schools serve as the nation-state’s apparatus of social capital reproduction? I might be overly critical in asserting this assessment for our nation as a whole. But a conspiracy, or at least a convergence of interests vested in the status quo, is the only plausible rationale
for such an unjust and undemocratic crisis as the race-based achievement gap. The crisis is emblematic of the fact that our nation is comfortable spending more taxpayer dollars per inmate than per pupil. There is a major problem. This aspect of the literature was highly relevant to my study.

In the literature and in my experience, lower-level tracks maintain the current power structure in society. Our schools mirror the social hierarchy reflected in many postsecondary institutions. Although there is no research that draws direct connections among school tracking, school suspensions, and criminal behavior, these authors draw a tattered line among the three. Although not explicitly stated, students in lower-level tracks are more prone to drop out of high school, become criminals, and, unfortunately, join gangs and meet an early demise. If education is the great equalizer, our system must take those who are reading below grade level and hold them to higher standards of literacy and support their growth in this direction. The best teachers are those who can take students at the bottom and teach them to excel to the top.

This literature review makes clear that diligent work must be done in thinking about our schools, diversifying the curriculum, training teachers in culturally relevant pedagogical techniques, and raising the level of expectations for all students. Only then can our schools actually be in a place where all children learn and are held accountable to high standards. Once students feel they are supported and have the opportunity for a bright and pleasant future, they will have no trouble getting off the streets and truly making something of their lives.

This dissertation seeks to take the literature from all areas that have been discussed to suggest a list of lessons that practitioners can use to manage the change
process as it relates to race. This dissertation looks at detracking as a tool or vehicle to get to those lessons. The literature on change management, which was useful to my work, reflected on change-related issues that deal with significant social issues, such as race, and explored the impact of those issues on the organization, operation, and culture of schools undergoing transformational change.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Research Question

When curriculum changes are implemented to promote racial equity in the face of opposition and inertia, what lessons can be learned for practitioners leading such change, both in terms of the characteristics of such leaders and the accompanying processes and conditions for success?

A Qualitative Case Study

This dissertation employs case-study methods of one-on-one interviews of each school board member who voted to detrack as a strategy for achieving racial equity at Lake Shore Community High School (LSCHS). It includes interviews of other administrators whose departments were impacted by the superintendent’s recommendation. I have used Critical Race Theory (CRT) to provide an analysis of statements that each board member and administrator shared in the interview.

Methods of Interpretation

Once I had completed the interviews, I needed to interpret their meaning. In Patricia Hinchey’s *Finding Freedom in the Classroom* (1998), she described the constructivist as one who “gives meaning to the facts, rather than the facts themselves, which matters when we talk about knowledge, about knowing something. When we have the facts of my family in dispute, how much can we say we know about it? The facts are meaningless until we attempt to interpret them, until we try to add them up into some coherent picture” (p. 3). Hinchey’s analysis helped to inform the leadership lessons I have included: the facts are meaningless until we attempt to interpret them, until we try to add them up into some coherent picture.
The manner in which I give meaning to my lived experience as a Black man is important to how I frame, write, and interpret my data and advocate for racial equity. This is important because my life determines how I give meaning to detracking as a strategy to achieve racial equity in education. Hinchey also said, “Knowledge is not something existing independently in the world, just waiting for us to find it; instead, knowledge comes into being only when a human being examines data (facts, artifacts, etc.) and assigns meaning to it” (p. 41). As a person of African descent, how I give meaning to a White middle-class system of education is critical in my epistemological approach. Likewise, the manner in which the superintendent of LSCHS gives meaning and advocates for racial equity, as a White male who has grown up privileged, is important in how I will use his words. I could only hope that more superintendents could take such courageous steps in leadership, as he is the one who began the journey of transformation for racial equity at LSCHS.

The constructivist lens is an appropriate tool for a systems analysis of racial equity. Hinchey stated, “Positivist conceptualizes knowledge as a thing—essentially, as verifiable information born of scientific investigation. Certain facts, truths, relationships exist in the world; if we apply ourselves to exploring the world methodically, we can discover them. Knowledge is there, waiting for us to find it” (p. 40). When looking at this objectively, how can I construe meaning to the process of racial equity?

A positivist frame, with its reliance upon linear thinking and the concrete, is a structure the literature refers to as an example of Whiteness and can get in the way of racial transformation. A constructivist view (which is non-linear and permits for multiple perspectives) allows my voice as that of an African American man to show up in my
evaluation. The constructivist view also gives preference and authenticity to my voice as a Black man and what this preference means for those who believe in racial equity. As I think of what I would like to capture, the constructivist approach lends itself to a more authentic view.

With this being said, it is clear that my study should be qualitative in nature. It is important to mention that schools are not about numbers—schools make up the combination of thousands of little voices and lives that complete a picture; therefore, the constructivist model is the best method.

**Data Collection**

The data collected in this study emerged from several interviews, which include, but are not limited to: the superintendent at the time, the newly elected school board president, a recently retired school board member, and every other board member who voted in favor of the administration’s recommendation to eliminate the straight-honors track of freshman humanities. I have also interviewed a former school board member who recently lost her seat on the LSCHS School Board after 20 years; many in the community would say she lost because of her vote to detrack humanities. The board members’ interviews are critical in understanding the courage it took to vote for this curricular and systemic change. In addition, I took the time to interview other retired school board members and district administrators, who are deeply involved in implementing the recommendation of the superintendent.

These interviews serve as a platform for the gathering of indispensable lessons about leadership in the face of the resistance and jeopardy associated with this initiative. In conducting these interviews, I also wanted to know how their leadership roles have
been impacted by the equity work. The superintendent made the formal recommendation to the school board in the late fall of 2010, weeks before the board took a vote. He put his job on the line in the name of racial equity. One interviewed school board incumbent took a chance, too, and experienced the phone calls and e-mails with pressure from both sides to vote up or down. This gentleman voted in favor of the proposal. He also won his re-election bid and now serves as board president.

I asked each leader several questions, beginning with the following:

1. From your vantage point, what has it been like to lead efforts to address racial inequities at LSCHS, specifically by restructuring freshman humanities?

2. How has the decision to detrack freshmen humanities impacted your leadership in the district?

3. What leadership lessons did you gain from this experience, from either voting or leading the efforts for such a controversial measure?

4. What principles inform your leadership role in the district?

5. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about leading for racial equity at LSCHS?

Using the information gathered from the interviews, I have written up the leadership lessons associated with our efforts to achieve racial equity through detracking. These questions were asked of every interviewee, yet the interview was semi-structured in that it allowed for each person to explore their own story of racial consciousness and leadership. These interviews served as data for the construction of this case study that includes leadership lessons around the core issues explored in this inquiry. Interviewing
both the English and history department chairs was important because it provided an in-depth view of how this policy change impacted each level of leadership. The department chairs did not vote with the school board but were involved in several attempts to get the board to set the district in a new direction. The department chairs would call themselves middle management, but their leadership was critical in getting both skeptical teachers and board members on board. The department chairs caught the “heat” from teachers and from district-level administrators. In the end, it is their responsibility not only to provide leadership for change, but also to implement that change. I also interviewed the director for research and assessment, the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, and, as already mentioned, the superintendent.

These interviews mostly ran for an hour; the shortest was the better part of 45 minutes. I interviewed a total of 15 people: all seven board members who were serving on the school board at the time, the Superintendent, the English department chairs (both the chair who served during the vote and the chair that succeeded) and history department chair, the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, two newly elected board members who did not vote on the move to detrack but were invested as community members at that time, and the director of technology, who was instrumental in setting the context for the BOE in that the person was one of the first teachers to teach a mixed-level course in the district before becoming an administrator.

**Data Analysis**

In studying leadership for race equity and change at LSCHS, I find it most interesting that leadership doctrines are transferable from one organization to another, across generations and socioeconomic lines. The leadership lessons shared in this
dissertation have the potential to guide other leaders in their quests for racial equity, a vision of organizational excellence, and social justice. These lessons, in the form of proverbs or principles, will provide support for any leader desiring to engineer change. The information shared in this chapter has the potential to guide other leaders in their quests for vision and organizational excellence.

I have taken the transcriptions and have captured themes, connections, consistencies, and inconsistencies. The interviewees represent each level of involvement in the district. As stated earlier, I used CRT as a means of analysis as I attempted to unpack the social construction of race, look for where the interest of Whites and people of color converge, offer a critique of liberalism, and understand the permanence of racism at LSCHS. The tenets of CRT have also assisted me in providing a rigorous analysis of the leadership lessons that emerge in this study. The five tenets have the unique ability to rightly discriminate among those lessons as ideas that actually address racial equity or those ideas that simply fall on the liberal continuum of principles that don’t fundamentally address the role race has played at LSCHS.

Validity: The Voices of Lake Shore Community High School

Authenticity is important to any researcher, because it gives credibility to the researcher and the researcher’s findings. My voice as a Black man is important to my research. This is why I have chosen to begin this dissertation with my story, which is told in the voice of one who has been oppressed. The voice of the Black man has been silenced, ignored, and abused for generations. And, for a long time, it was absent from the legal record within the courts of the United States, because slaves and their descendants did not have a right to testify against Whites. Therefore, I think it is
particularly powerful for my voice to speak in the matter of leading for racial equity. This case study also has some characteristics of an auto-ethnographic study. I draw from my own life and experience, or my racial consciousness growing up Black in America. As stated in Chapter 1, my father’s words to “never trust a White man” echo in the chambers of my mind as I attempt to deconstruct his advice while understanding how a majority-White school board moved to lead for racial equity. I cannot escape my own racial narrative as I try to give meaning and context to this case study.

One interesting aspect about what I hope to capture with this study is the fact that my voice as a Black man cannot stand alone; at LSCHS my voice was in a context that included the voices of White allies. Due to systemic racism, my voice must ultimately be supported by Whiteness, that is, the social construction of what it means to be a White American in the 21st century. Glenn Singleton, in his book *Courageous Conversations about Race* (2007), defined Whiteness as “color, culture, and consciousness.” There is a need for White allies, who present a counter-narrative as they work hard to de-center Whiteness and understand how the powerful and privileged impact their work as leaders for racial equity.

An additional voice will be that of the current superintendent of LSCHS. His vision of the racial equity work, put adjacent to the voiced visions of board members and department chairs, will provide many-layered data for stimulating analysis in this qualitative case study of change for racial equity. The data extracted from the interviews will shed some light on the district’s attempts to educate all children and the characteristics of leaders who made the effort successful.
CHAPTER 4: LEADING FOR RACIAL EQUITY: THE POWER OF THE PERSONAL JOURNEY

My Journey of Racial Consciousness

My African American Identity

I identify myself as an African American man in his mid-thirties. I have come to learn many lessons about race in America and my family. I have come to understand there are unknowable connections to both my family’s and community’s African past. I know my ancestors came from somewhere in Africa, but I am not exactly sure of which country. It is noteworthy for this dissertation that this aspect of my personhood continues to evade me, and as I am the fourth generation out of slavery, my children and I are still impacted by its lasting effects.

In the summer of 2010, I had the opportunity to travel to Africa for the first time in my life. The experience was surreal. I could not believe I was so far away from home. I also found it hard to believe that I was on the continent considered to be the birthplace of civilization. The people of Nigeria were warm and welcoming. As a matter of fact, many Nigerians were proud to learn that it was my first visit to the Motherland. They also marveled at the fact that I, an African descendant, had found my way home. In my interactions with the natives of Nigeria, I was frequently embraced with a genuine sense of brotherhood and honor. For the first time in my life, my dark skin color, the shape of my head, the size of my nose, the size of my lips, and the texture of my hair were reflected in the sea of people around me. I was the norm and not the exception.

This experience provides context and meaning for my research; my life as an African American man who is an educator and who has been to Africa informs this study
as it does my worldview. And over the course of my life, I have come to realize that although I was born and raised middle class, I am not privileged. This life experience has brought about my desire to engage in work concerning race in public schools.

**My Schooling and Lessons My Father Taught Me**

I grew up in a house where my father taught me to “never trust a White man.” The words he uttered became ingrained in the fabric of my consciousness as my worldview began to take shape. I imagine I will continue to deconstruct these words the more I learn about life and the social construction of race. My father died May 17, 2004, 50 years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, but his words live in my awareness as I attempt to apprehend an elusive construct of race and its impact on society.

I grew up in a Black neighborhood on the south side of Chicago. I had one White friend in the second grade named Dwayne. Dwayne and I were good friends, so I used to ask him to do my homework because I hated writing my spelling words 10 times each. I had no guilt in letting Dwayne do my work because, at the time, I was thinking it was only fair to have him do my work because my forefathers worked for his. I enjoyed my friendship with Dwayne and was not malicious to him in any way; however, it was the only way I could conceptualize how I was to interact with a White peer. I was only seven years old.

Dwayne eventually transferred from our school, and I continued my education in the Chicago Public School system without a single White classmate, only White teachers. This continued all the way through high school. In an all-Black community, I learned to find pride in being African American. Maintaining and holding onto self-pride as a Black man can be a constant struggle in a world of White supremacy, but I was in a good place.
While a student at Lindblom Technical High School, I received the Golden Apple Scholar award that granted me a $25,000 scholarship to attend an Illinois university and commit to teaching in an Illinois school of high need. After having an amazing, inspirational teacher in high school, I decided to go into teaching. I had also been concerned about the state of Black men in my school and community. I decided to go into education to help young Black boys navigate and code switch. I had learned to do it, so I wanted to teach others what I thought I had mastered. Mentoring young boys was and still remains a passion of mine, which makes education a perfect gift for me.

While attending the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, I was the only Black person in many of my courses, but by the time I started college, I was already grounded in what I thought it meant to be smart and Black. The coming-of-age process many adolescents go through in constructing their identities seemed to have passed for me, and although I was the only Black person in many of my lectures and seminars, I was comfortable in what it meant to be Black in that context. Over the course of time, I developed many relationships with my White classmates, whom I found to be trustworthy. These friendships were very rich, and I immediately began to feel that my father was wrong about Whites. But whenever I had uncomfortable interactions with Whites or found myself in awkward conversations about race with Whites, my father’s words would echo in my mind, reminding me of who had the real power in the world. My father’s words also came to mind as I saw my White friends navigating an invisible system of privilege. My father’s words also helped me to unpack White privilege. I got it—he was attempting to tell me about White privilege, a concept I would learn to fold into the tenet of Whiteness as Property.
Along with my father’s influence, my experience in an Afro-studies class at the University of Illinois helped me begin my personal journey of racial consciousness. Although I had had experiences in the past that made me conscious of race, I did not mature into such conversations until I read three texts: Gloria Ladson-Billings’s *Dreamkeepers*, Alain Locke’s *New Negro*, and Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative in the Life of Fredrick Douglass*. These texts allowed me to drill down into what it meant to struggle, to be born and raised in an urban environment, and come to embrace Black intellectualism and scholarship. As a result of these texts, I decided to minor in African American studies. This kept me in school long enough to figure out my life as a budding racial scholar, while also shaping how I would later approach the classroom.

**Joining the Lake Shore Community High School Faculty**

Just before graduating from college, I secured a job teaching English at LSCHS on Chicago’s suburban North Shore, where I would continue my racial journey. I was excited and appreciative that such a great institution of learning could have so much faith in a young Black man like me. When I arrived to teach, I discovered something very interesting regarding student placement—tracking. It seemed to me that all of the regular classes were full of Black and Hispanic students, but the honors-level courses were full of White students. At the time, I wasn’t ready to accuse the school of being racist, but I knew something was inherently wrong. Starting my career at LSCHS also revealed that I needed to learn how to be culturally relevant with White students, just as many White teachers have to learn the same for students of color. I eventually learned, but I still felt there was more to understanding the systemic issues that related to the racial opportunity and achievement as well as placement disparities at LSCHS. I was not naïve enough to
think this was only a problem in this high school—I knew this was a national issue. I was also not naïve enough to think the way we tracked at our school did not contribute to the achievement disparities on standardized tests.

While getting settled at LSCHS, I began to hear a few buzz terms: MSAN (Minority Student Achievement Network), the achievement gap, anti-racist pedagogy, entitlement, White privilege, and tracking. I knew what these words meant in theory, but as a brand-new teacher, I had no clue how they were affecting students at LSCHS. At the time, the district superintendent began a conversation about non-White student achievement with other school districts that had similar racial demographics and disparities in achievement data. His purpose was to figure out how to address these achievement disparities between White students and students of color. The MSAN network grew and elevated conversations about the achievement gap into a national discourse. At the time this was happening, I was still a young teacher, trying to comprehend what I saw happening at LSCHS.

How I Arrived at My Current Work

I later enrolled in DePaul University’s social and cultural foundations in education program. I looked forward to what the program would reveal about the racial disparities in education. It initially helped me to begin to talk about race, culture, and power in the classroom. We also studied CRT and a host of other ideas, concepts, and theoretical frameworks that would forever seal my purpose in education. Upon completing the program, I was thoroughly satisfied with the content and the manner in which it was presented. My master’s thesis focused on how academic tracking leads to incarceration.
I graduated and was able to put my new degree to good work. I assumed the role of special programs coordinator, a new position at LSCHS, in which my purpose was to help students become more successful in more rigorous academic environments; this was a way to ensure racial equity in our school. My current job at LSCHS centers on what informs this dissertation: leading transformational change for racial equity.

It still amazes me that I get paid to do my job. I get an opportunity to take hundreds of students and systematically move them in a direction where they can receive the best education possible. One would think the American public education system would already accomplish this, but it does not. One could argue that the current system serves as an apparatus of social reproduction (Bale, 2012). One would also think that education would be the great equalizer, but schools reproduce and perpetuate the social hierarchies that exist in our society (Bale, 2012). Students of color in most schools are tracked to fail and, in some systems, are rarely exposed to an academically rigorous curriculum (Gamoran, 1992). Therefore, they never acquire the skills necessary to be successful in life, which compromises their careers and life trajectories. One could argue the failure of our schools is reflected in the volume of crime, homelessness, and hopelessness one can find in urban ghettos (Gamoran, 1989).

My current position involves taking students who have the academic ability to handle the rigor of school and support them in the process of learning. Yet, I find I am constantly asking myself the same question: “Shouldn’t we be doing this for all students?” I wrestle daily with the tension of educational access for all students and this has led me to think more critically about larger systemic changes. Educators should not only focus on the gifted and talented, but also on those who need acceleration instead of
remediation. I know this opens up a pedagogical and philosophical discourse regarding how to move students who are deficient in skills, but discovering how to go about building racial equity in a system that discriminates is quite a task. I am often conflicted in my existing position because I use the current flawed system to help students, but I know it doesn’t go far enough. As an administrator, I get to change the existing system so that it can support more students of color like the ones enrolled in special programs like AVID at LSCHS. AVID is an acronym for Advancement Via Individual Determination. It is a program that takes students who are in the academic middle and pushes them to take honors- and AP-level courses. It also requires them to get into college. AVID was one of the early programs initiated by LSCHS to address the achievement gap; however, I always think of the students who are being left behind. The real tension in my work is that our school should do a better job at systematically achieving what I have done with just a minimal systems approach that is focused on a limited number of students (Senge, 1990).

Another important role I play in my current position is as our district’s racial equity director. My job is to facilitate conversations about race and, along with our leadership team, recognize systemic racial inequities in the school and determine how to address them. LSCHS began its equity work in the spring of 2009. We spent our first year having courageous conversations among ourselves as school leaders about race with the Pacific Education Group (PEG). There were a total of eight sessions, all geared toward personal and institutional transformation. As a team, we had been thinking, learning, and challenging ourselves in ways that demanded personal and professional reflection and accountability. By spring 2010, we took our entire teaching staff through Courageous
Conversations (2007), a curriculum authored by Glenn Singleton and Curtis Linton. In doing so, we found that as we attempted to build systemic capacity for racial equity, this conversation and the ensuing work often turned into a political spectacle.

There are many leaders all over the country who believe education is either the signature civil rights or human rights issue of our time. In addition to the courageous conversations held in the district in 2009, a regulatory requirement pushed us to a new level. No Child Left Behind requires school districts to disaggregate their achievement data based on race. Data across the country document the disparity in student achievement by race, commonly referred to as the achievement gap. This study looks at one district’s quest to achieve racial equity by detracking a course that all incoming freshmen take—freshman humanities—and seeks to discover what district leaders have learned about leadership as they use de-tracking as a strategy to achieve racial equity.

Leading has its own challenges, while examining race poses other challenges. This study is particularly important because leading for racial equity demands a particular dexterity and skill in leadership, while understanding and addressing issues of race (Singleton, 2006).

Conflicted Voices: Institutional Racism in a Diverse and Liberal Community

My years at LSCHS have taught me that district leadership is full of political maneuvering and other baggage, all of which impacts the people the district is supposed to protect first—students. As I brought my personal journey to the task of improving racial equity at LSCHS, so did every leader who participated in the process. In the midst of leading, leaders recognize that the first person they lead is themselves (Boyatzis, 2005). Leadership is full of crises and opportunities that cause ghosts from the past to rise
up and make any leader relive an experience. With that being said, all district leaders I spoke with talked about their personal commitments to eliminating racism. They also referenced many aspects of their personal journeys that have led them to do this work. I was struck by the personal stories many of them had to share, mostly baby boomers, who had lived through the Civil Rights Movement. Their life experiences caused them to lead in the manner in which they do today (2005). But I was particularly struck by the tone of many of their voices as they talked about personal journeys of racism.

The Lake Shore community is diverse and prides itself on its liberalism, but liberalism can be a liability. Viewed through the lens of CRT, liberalism is critiqued for its reliance on incremental change and working within the system. It is a specific subject for critique in CRT, because in the context of racism, liberalism is an ineffective model of social change. Unlike liberal leaders for civil rights, leaders for racial equity courageously take on the status quo and all those who benefit from the way things are; these leaders leave situations better than when they entered them (Wagner, 2012). In the spirit of working for change that goes beyond the small increments of liberalism, one of the most important decisions to be made by equity leaders at LSCHS was to confront racism; this confrontation occurred at the level of the community, but in many cases the confrontation was also personal and self-reflective. I am very grateful these leaders took time to talk with me about this issue. Everyone I asked to interview sat down with me. The time they gave to this project was invaluable to my understanding the journey toward racial equity in education at LSCHS.

Many liberal communities boast that they are inclusive, and those that are racially diverse boast of being inclusive and diverse. But, if racism is alive and well in the 21st
century, it is clear that racism exists in communities with very nice, well-meaning Whites who work at being open and honest about their own racial biases and the systemic issues their communities face. Many of the interviewees focused on the issue of confronting racism in one of the most diverse, well-educated communities in the country. Racism had been allowed to thrive within the rich and myriad diversity of the community.

There was no question—in the abstract—that racism was alive and well, even in this community of hip and socially conscious liberals; although to admit the existence of racism meant each White liberal who moved into town because of its diversity might also be admitting they may not have gotten it right. The ethos of such a diverse community would seem to signal that there is diversity and inclusion without the barrier of racism. One district leader, a person of color, said, “You only hear White people say that ‘I moved here because of its diversity.’” It is clear that diversity in this community is an asset as well as a challenge. And, like all communities that are woven into the American fabric, these communities are constructed within the context of a troubled history of racism.

It takes courage to take this on in a community with such diversity, where Whites feel they are well versed on issues of equality and equity. It is pretty amazing to see these leaders step up to the plate and say that systemic racism has been at work in a community that prides itself on diversity. The language of the achievement gap elicits the meta-message of institutional racism.

Liberalism’s piecemeal approach often ignores root causes. One such root cause, the question of racially determined academic expectations, must be confronted to bring about racial equity in the schools. Many liberals have a hard time examining their beliefs
about the intersection of race and schools, because their beliefs may actually reveal they believe one racial group of students is superior to another. Part of the problem is that these beliefs may cause people to hold higher expectations of some, but not all, students.

In her interview, Jenna talked about the low expectations in the LSCHS community:

For whatever reason, in our community in particular, but I think it’s a nationwide problem, kids of color have not been doing as well on these nationally-normed standardized tests that have been gatekeepers historically for students in our district to enter higher-level classes. Ten years ago, I was running the tutoring program here. I arranged tutoring for kids who were struggling in whatever level class. It kind of gave me a sick feeling in my stomach when a freshman came in one day—freshman year, they do Romeo and Juliet—and he had a comic book of Romeo and Juliet … and I said, “You’re reading the play too, right?” And he said, “No, this is all we’re doing.” I’m forgetting the placement terminology … “straight two or regular,” I think. I really couldn’t believe it. I know there’s a place for graphic novels in school, but it cannot be a substitution for literature.

Institutional racism impacts the quality of education to which students of color have access, but such racism also impacts those who work to change the system. A Black woman on the board shared something to this effect and also some of the conflicted dynamics of working for change in the LSCHS community:

I had been on the board for a long time—20 years—and I believe the people who elected me were no longer interested in LSCHS. If it doesn’t apply to them directly, sometimes, people aren’t paying any attention at all. Some people think I’m still on the board. That was part of it. I also think it was backlash for freshman humanities. They voted for another guy instead of me, which really sucks because he’s doing such an anti-Black thing. And it was a lie, all a lie. Which is, to me, shocking. It’s not what … I knew his mother pretty well, and I wonder if she’s rolling. So that’s because … I don’t know. I actually don’t even know what goes on the board because it upsets me when I hear what he’s doing. That troubles me, because, as I’ve said before … people in Lake Shore Community love the label of being liberal, and tolerant, and all the things. They want that advantage of appearing liberal and all the things that are supposedly popular in terms of identity. To be accused of being racist now is like the worst thing … which is funny because I think “evil” is worse. I can remember attacking somebody on the board at a party after some incident at school. How hard it was for him to deal with people when they ask about Lake Shore Community. This is
your trouble, telling your friends that you’re worried about your home value stopping? It’s a bunch of bullshit, really. But people love that [liberal] title, yet they don’t want to pay the cost. To draw on an analogy: the people in Newtown thought that they were immune from violence, that they had an enclave of safety. Lake Shore Community people are like that, because they all want to be safe, but they pride themselves on, I think, being edgy. Turn their noses up … There are issues in the country that all of us face … but people think they’ve been shortchanged by a compromise. They say, “Oh, we can’t do that.”

The discomforts and contradictions of working for change in a diverse, liberal community are expressed by Carolyn Gaines, another longtime school board member:

Because they haven’t given up colonialism (laughs), and that whole model. That was a social work model. Missionaries … They really haven’t given it up: after-school program—that is why they all came in here. This agency and this over there got more toys than they’ve ever had because it’s been more shootings in the ‘hood. Toys and programs … As long as White people are in control to say they’re going to teach you because you don’t know. “You’re native, from an indigenous planet …” They want to be the caretakers, to teach you to be like them and not like yourself. That’s why, because they’re still into that whole “we are the missionaries and these people need to be taught.” I don’t think it’s necessarily out of guilt as much as it’s out of “I know, because I am God.” It’s to that extent. You don’t know obviously, because look at your life. I know. That’s why I think this community struggles. The flip side of it is that people of color do not realize that they’re free. They’re still psychologically chained, and that’s why they’re allowed to get away with it.

The hiring of the current superintendent provided an opportunity to see the conflicted state of leadership in the district. It split the board along racial lines. One leader (a Black woman) talked about how dichotomized the school board was over this hiring: “We needed some workshops after that; it was a hard time for the board.” This particular incident is important, because for this board member, the split wasn’t simply a professional one—the response was very personal. What happens in our professional lives does impact our personal well-being, but I could tell that this board member took deeply to heart the fact that the racial split could have indicated a hidden racist personal belief system. This was hard because no one, especially White liberals, wants to be seen
as a racist, but the vote for the current superintendent was seen as racist by some. The previous candidate for superintendent was a Black woman. This personal experience for some who were around at the time raised interesting questions. The Black board members wanted to hire the Black woman, the White board members wanted to hire the White male.

The road to detracking as a step toward racial equity at LSCHS occurred in this context of hidden and open divisions. The process became contentious in part because there was no agreement among the district leadership regarding the nature of racism and its effects on the achievement gap. There were leaders who spoke openly about institutional racism and there were other leaders who pointed more to economic factors and their roles in the achievement disparities of this particular institution. There were some leaders who pointedly alluded to the fact that other leaders within the district were openly opposed to the recent measures proposed by the superintendent and the administration. They would not state directly who those individuals were, but they were very clear that there was dissent in the ranks regarding the path of racial equity at this school. Many stated that there were others with whom they sat and worked who were not strong advocates of Black and Brown children. In the liberal environment of LSCHS, no one went as far as to call these individuals racist, but there were strong sentiments that everyone was not on board with measures like detracking.

**When Denial of Racism is an Obstacle: The Example of Academic Rigor**

One reason the personal acknowledgment of racism is important is that the very acknowledgment can free a leader to see the workings of racism within his or her school system. One arena in which covert (and not so covert) racism plays a prominent role is in
the debate over race equity and academic rigor, a discussion into which has crept the argument that family culture, rather than race, is a determining factor in high or low achievement. Spending some time with examples of this dynamic is helpful in thinking about characteristics of leaders for race equity, because the examples make clear how sneaky racism can be when change is proposed, especially in the context of a diverse and liberal community. If, as CRT maintains, racism is permanent, we can expect racism to be sneaky and should prepare leaders to work with this.

The debate for most district leaders was primarily about how to lessen the impact of race in schools, but they spent some time worrying about how a district can do that without compromising the education of high-achieving students, who are predominantly White. The CRT tenet that Whiteness is a form of property explains why parents come to believe the proposition that effectively educating students of color will negatively impact the education of White students who are gifted. Because they were open and willing to talk about the role of race and its impact on students of color, these leaders were only rarely distracted by the argument that academic rigor is compromised by plans to promote academic access and success to all students. Nevertheless, this issue was raised by participants in the controversy, including some from surprising quarters. I believe these leaders held varying perspectives on race, but would have agreed that race is a factor in the achievement gap. With race on the table, district leaders could remain focused.

Interestingly, the only person who appeared even remotely critical of students of color happened to be a person of color. I would imagine this person felt he would be in the best position to hold the community of color accountable for its lack of participation
in school activities, but he can be seen, in effect, to promote the idea that families of

color, rather than racism, are responsible for low achievement scores of students of color:

When we did the newest restructuring, I was baffled. Not as much because of
what we’re doing, but how we were framing it. It wasn’t, I don’t believe, a racial
issue. It’s a cultural issue that involves race. There’s a culture of entitlement in
Lake Shore Community, and then a culture of “we’re just here,” and that crosses
racial lines. White kids in school don’t feel they’re entitled to everything, and that
was my issue. If you’re going to address equity in this way, do it without making
it a racial issue. You get pushback. I grew up in Lake Shore Community and then
went south for undergrad. In the South, it was clear what Lake Shore Community
wasn’t. It was clear that Lake Shore Community wasn’t educating Black kids at a
high level, because Lake Shore Community gave me the thought that I’m tops
here in the African American community. All honors and AP. These boys can’t
tell me anything. Those southern boys whooped my tail. Didn’t matter where
from, what school. They valued education.

This issue of cultural accountability would not have happened in this way if a
White person were to express these opinions about the community of color. It seems as if
White people are a little resistant to being critical of people of color for fear of being
called racist, so in this situation the interests of the silent White racists and the outspoken
person of color converge; this fits almost exactly the CRT analysis of the convergence of
interests. Bigots opposed to detracking benefited from the presence of a person of color
who maintained that race was not the issue.

One district leader commented on this very occurrence and referenced it during
his interview:

If I’m going to successfully operate in an interracial situation, I have to
understand why what I’m doing may be perceived as racial, even if it isn’t. The
fact that it isn’t is not sufficient to solve the problem. I watched, for example, I
learned a lot from the whole interaction between … the principal and Barbara at
that one board meeting. It was like they were in separate universes, because
Barbara had a point she wanted to make, and I don’t think the principal even
disagreed with the point. Her point was that we couldn’t just put this menu of
things before students and say, “partake,” because some families push harder. So,
we had to do outreach. I think, at some point, she said something like, “We need
to educate Black families about honors.” That set the principal off, and I
understand now why. I think maybe relating to people’s perceptions is better than ignoring them, but even better than that is overcoming it. It’s hard to do this in a board meeting or something like it … but it was like that interaction was like watching two people from different planets. Here’s the head school leader, attacking Barbara because of what he takes from what she said, and Barbara utterly bewildered about why she’s being attacked. I think two well-intentioned, reasonable people like that … that can be worked out.

This particular leader committed the unthinkable crime: a White liberal, commenting on the parenting priorities of people of color and being called out by a person of color who thought the comments were offensive. When district leaders have discussions about race as they think about implementing racially conscious policies like detracking, these kinds of dustups are common. This is why negotiating conversations about race is difficult and delicate. There must be certain levels of relational trust and good faith, so that even if a person may say something offensive, there is enough trust capital in the bank to get through any hurt feelings or a lack of understanding.

All but one person of color with whom I spoke admitted to the role of race and racism at work in this diverse community; however, there was one individual who did not want to put race on the table. He discussed the fact that parents played a larger role than race in the achievement of students, yet in the same interview, this person admitted that the school had not prepared him as well as other schools prepared Black males. He did not attribute this to the school, but to his own failure as a student, obscuring the racial forces at play, but it seems one rarely hears that LSCHS fails to prepare White kids. I would dare to say each and every White student who graduates from this school may not actually care deeply about education and their future, but they would not say this school did not adequately prepare them. I get the sense this district leader, as a person of color,
struggles with his own internalized oppression, where the system that did not prepare him
wasn’t at fault, but the fault was his own failure as a student:

My concern is that by making this a racial issue, we’re going to miss what was really there. People say we have two schools here. You know what? We have two schools in this building, if that’s what you want to believe. I’ve seen kids with little resources except for a parent telling them to get an education; I’ve seen them in honors classes. I had a friend who took nothing but regular classes, but he got As. He’s doing great.

This district leader is in denial about race as it relates to racial predictability in student achievement. It seems this person has engaged in the classic blame-the-victim strategy. This particular district leader, in denying the role of race in achievement scores, cannot consider the situation in which students of color have found themselves. This person cannot consider what factors have led students of color to be consistently behind White students in academic performance, especially if there are no inherent genetic inadequacies. There must be some other force at work that continues to keep the Black community permanently behind. I would say this district leader is also correct on a number of things. There are significant issues within the Black community that should be addressed by the Black community. But there is a cause-and-effect relationship occurring here that is fostered primarily by racism.

What is even more shocking is that he blames himself for his own failures, which might seem admirable, but he openly states that this school, the one from which he graduated, did not prepare him as well as other schools prepared other Black men. He blames this failure on himself and not the school. His comments reveal that there was a culture of low expectations, where he would do enough to get by, and the school’s response was to reward him for it. I agree with him; this is not the way to reward a student of color who does just enough to get by. His teenage lack of academic discipline
converged with the interests of White people who maintained a better, predominantly White school within LSCHS, while allowing him to take the academically easy way out. But what he fails to realize is the culture of low expectations is the worst form of racism. I am glad he had his parents to advocate for him in the time of need, but I wonder what happens to the other students who don’t have parents to advocate for them because many of those parents were victims of the same type of racism when they were students at the same school. The perpetual cycle of low expectations from one generation to the next, which often involves some of the same teachers and administrators, keeps many families behind.

When district leaders don’t believe that race is a factor with racial subgroups, it presents a problem. It has the potential to retard the fidelity of the policy’s implementation or makes for a more toxic climate, as those who are courageous in tackling the problem begin to work even harder. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) required schools to focus on race, and LSCHS has taken strategic steps to consider the role of race in its disaggregated data, but one of the obstacles district leaders faced was this denial of racism as a primary cause. This becomes increasingly problematic when the person at the table who denies the role of race happens to be a person of color, but it makes sense in a diverse and liberal community that the person who can most safely raise such issues is a person of color, in a convergence of his interests with those of the silent White racists.

This person of color had been a victim of an unjust system, yet he looked back to his experience and only blamed himself, not the school. The internalized oppression of this district leader could provide cover for White leaders who would deny the role of race or even go out on a limb to say that racism is a thing of the past. Although this situation
did not play out with these leaders, this particular situation is not uncommon. What is different in this case is that among these district leaders who identify as White and people of color, all but one—a person of color—were able to talk about the role of race in this study.

**Self-Reflection as Part of the Racial Journey**

In the narratives about confronting racism and the personal race journey, very few people talked about their own racism. The interviews struck me with a surface tone of transparency and integrity, but the discussion of race and antiracist work began with someone else, not with the interview subject himself or herself. As stated earlier, there are cultural messages that keep people from admitting to racism. As I reflect on the presidential election of 2012, in the aftermath of Barack Obama’s re-election, I notice examples of racists who understand it is culturally unacceptable in the public arena to declare oneself a racist. An older farmer in Mississippi hung an Obama-like doll from a noose, but stated emphatically that he was not a racist. In another example, there was a young woman who posted on her Facebook wall, “I hope that nigger gets assassinated in his second term.” But she said to a news reporter, “I have Black friends. I am not a racist.” Those two examples are easy to decode for their racist content, but what about those who blame problems in the Black community on Black people themselves?

One district leader, Barbara Brown, commented:

I think some of it is subconscious, internalized racism. I think some of it is not being able to come to terms with the difficult situations many Black families find themselves in. When my son was in first grade, there was this boy named Isaiah, who had the smile of an angel, and he and I got close. One day, when I was going into my son’s school at lunchtime, he was really, really angry. He took it out on me, and he was angry because his mom wasn’t there. So, we proceeded to walk down the hall, and somebody was line leader for that day, and we walked down the hall, and he said, “I hate White people, I hate White people.” Okay, so I think
there’s this polarization that exists that does damage to kids in elementary and middle school.

This leader went on to say that LSCHS may not be entirely to blame for the gap, because the disparities date back to elementary school. From the early grades, Black students were rarely in the highest reading group. The messages about who is smart and who is not smart had begun when the students at LSCHS had been very young. The leader begins to say that among White liberals in the community, many of them see the Blacks as an underclass. Brown continued:

I think our community’s Black population is viewed as an underclass. That message comes across loud and clear. When I was a member of my elementary school’s PTA, it was unusual to have more than two Black parents at any PTA meeting. So, we tried to engage in outreach, but it didn’t work because I think they brought to the table their own sense of inferiority, and their anger at their situations. Going back to Isaiah: he was the boy in first grade. He was … so angry that I was there and his mother wasn’t. There’s a sense that African American people don’t belong in schools, and they come out for the Carnival, the Fall Festival, but when there’s an academic issue, they’re not there. We made a lot of progress in terms of getting Black parents to conferences, but what they hear at conferences is that their kids are behind.

Despite the attitudes these district leaders brought with them to the changes at LSCHS, most of them chose to confront racism, even if it was difficult for them to admit that such a horrible thing existed in their community, with its rich diversity. As one leader said, noting that she is a person who identifies herself as being a White liberal:

“White liberals are just as racist as everybody else; I know I was.”

The leaders at LSCHS worked on honest self-reflection, leaving us with insights into the process of self-understanding on the race journey. Ben Davidson, a board member, commented on his history of growing up in this community and also on what it feels like to be referred to as a White liberal who is racist. He reminds us that there are
nuances and subtleties to the category White liberal, even if the inherent racism is present:

I was always very different as a kid, not just because I was Jewish, but because I was smart and not athletic. I was ... let’s get into self-pity ... I was an outcast as a kid. I got beat up a lot, and one of the things that helped reduce my level of racism was my being an equal-opportunity victim. White kids beat me as much as I was beat by Black kids. So that was a positive side of it (laughs). I’ve always felt “otherly” on various levels. I think that, to some extent, and this is some psychological self-analysis here, I came to make a virtue of my unpopularity. I embraced it, like “Okay, nobody can tell me what to think or do.” Also, and I said this at the PEG session, in terms of race, there was always a dichotomy in my upbringing and perspective. On the one hand, my parents were dyed-in-the-wool civil rights liberals. When I had kids, when Jessica was a baby, I sang her to sleep with “We Shall Overcome.” One of my first memories of this community is in 1967, marching with my parents and MLK Sr. for an open housing ordinance. On the other hand, we knew no Black people. I had no Black friends. I think the only regular Black presence in our home growing up was the maid.

There are two levels. What’s the movie? Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner, right? It was kind of like ... very intellectualized ... an example was going on the march, but I had no Black friends. Black acquaintances, kids at LSCHS, I knew. Then I think, so I was attracted to civil rights law, in part, intellectually and, in part, due to that notion of the underdog. Then I had experiences representing clients that deepened my ... I’ve had cases that people don’t believe actually happened in America anymore. I had a case of a mother and son, both African American, who lived in a Chicago neighborhood and went to Popeye’s. At some point, they realized that every time they wanted to use the restroom, it was being serviced. When White people wanted to use it, it was working. It was on the near west side. We sued, and won them a lot of money. I felt good about that, because it offended me at such a basic level. It wasn’t some intellectual thing. It’s like, people can’t go to the bathroom, you know? But I still, it may sound strange, I wish I was friends with more Black people. Is that bizarre to say? I guess you could say if I wanted to, I would.

In this progression to self understanding, some White individuals spoke openly about their privileges and power in society. One board member related:

I realized that, oh my God, I’ve wandered around life as an upper-middle-class White guy, never really fully understanding or recognizing the privilege I had, and it forced me to think about that. And, of course, on the heels of that is the immediate question: Why shouldn’t everyone have these privileges? I like having them. I benefit from them. Giving them to others doesn’t take them away from me. Why wouldn’t everybody want them? It’s this idea of basic fairness ... It hit
me like a ton of bricks. In terms of my basic ability to admit that ... I’ve reached a point in my life where I’m comfortable with whom I am. I’m not afraid of learning new things and to talk about things I need to improve on. I don’t fear that. Maybe when I was younger. It’s hard to know. I don’t fear it now, and didn’t then. It made me think about race in a different way.

This is probably a great oversimplification, and you’ve heard me say this before, I think, but it’s the only way I can kind of frame a conversation for some people when the word “racism” gets in the way. I’ve got a working explanation that helps simplify ... A lot of people, especially White guys or White people in general, when they hear “racism,” the only thing that comes to their heads a lot of times is individual bad acts and thoughts. What comes to my head is people who have bad feelings and do bad acts against people of color. I came to realize that other people who don’t look like me, who don’t have the privilege I have, who suffer all the subtle putdowns and disadvantages I don’t even recognize most of the time—I’ve gotten better but, you know. I think when they hear the word “racism,” I think what comes to mind is the whole system, the whole institutionalized construct that makes it more difficult to get things done and live their daily lives. The entire world in which they live is set up in a way that advantages others and disadvantages them. Then the problem becomes how to navigate that system, and I think that’s what comes to mind for a lot of people. That’s my guess as a White guy. For me, it’s useful to look at it that way because it helps define this broad gap in understanding I think exists between how people of privilege view racism and how people on the other end of that racism define it. It’s useful to talk about that difference.

LSCHS, the setting for this plan to detrack, exists in a racially diverse community where racism exists, but the impact of racism is obscured by the community’s image of itself as liberal and the community’s determination to maintain that self-image.

**Confronting Racism Despite the Opposition**

Many policy wonks have their problems with NCLB, but this federal mandate has gotten liberal communities to talk about race and, to some degree, admit to racism in their districts and schools (Leonardo, 2007).

I was around when the drama went down. I remember going to the meetings leading up to the vote regarding the change in freshman humanities. The racial tension was high as one community member looked at a Black student who spoke at a public
forum and said, “This is all about reparations.” The student was reduced to tears. There was talk about real estate values going down and speech about “bright flight” in this community. This would all happen if the school board were to vote in favor of the changes to the freshman year. I remember going to the meetings leading up to the vote. Under the glare of bright lights and an auditorium packed full of parents, students, and community members, there were district leaders who seemed cool, calm, and collected. I was intrigued to discover what these leaders were thinking after they were attacked with such rhetoric.

To my surprise, many leaders were unfazed by the controversy. It appears that many had seen worse. These were experienced and seasoned men and women, who had been at the center of more controversial measures in their personal careers. The superintendent was also matter-of-fact about the tense feelings and drama. I was surprised to see that many leaders were confident about this change; they believed in the change, and therefore, the noise from the community didn’t faze them much.

But after the school board took the vote and more word spread in the community about what was actually happening at the local high school, there were incidents that happened to school board members that took them by surprise. One leader said that White people she had known and worshipped with for over 30 years had stopped speaking to her. Sadly, an issue of race and different views over tracking was stronger than the faith that tied them together. Another leader believed she actually lost her seat on the school board as she advocated for Black and Brown children.

One district leader wept openly about all the hurtful things that had been done and said about her and her family as a result of this change. This person had been a member
of this community for a number of years and was totally flabbergasted by the blatant racism and hostility of neighbors and so-called friends. This person went on to say that their kids grew up playing with kids of all races, and they never knew the parents had such deep-seated and rancorous beliefs. “I mean, come on. It is 2012. Why do you still believe that? And you live in this community for its diversity, and then you say such hurtful things about Blacks. Give me a break,” this person stated. “The hypocrisy is painful.”

During the debates and adoption of the plan to detrack, some community leaders reported that people would stop them to say hurtful things. They were also surprised that people they had known for years were not philosophically in agreement with the changes that were going on at the high school. Many community members stated blatantly racist things to both people of color and White people over the change. But in all this, the district leadership remained calm. I would imagine there were some sleepless nights and cold sweats dealing with so many people in opposition, but this was not communicated in the interviews. There were leaders who dismissed the fury as part of the process, while others simply said there were many people in the community who acted just as this person thought they would.

The narrative was clear in the argument over who was smart: White kids were smart. When leaders were challenged with follow-up questions regarding their opposition to detracking, they were very cautious to be politically correct. Some leaders said that other leaders were part of the problem. They added that these people have been part of the problem in the community for years. But of course, those individuals wouldn’t see themselves as part of the problem; instead, they were thinking about the best interests of
all kids, both White and of color. When I asked one leader about his ideas regarding having low expectations for students of color, and whether that was part of the problem, he only replied that the other leaders were part of the problem.

As many district leaders recounted their personal histories, there was a common theme they all seemed to adopt: we know this is a problem, but we don’t know what to do. There were others who felt that socioeconomic status played more of a role than race, but when I pushed them in questioning, many relented and said that race and class in this community, and in many around the nation, are two different sides of the same coin. And when asked what contributes to such a system of “disadvantage,” the answers were mixed.

Once they had been confronted by the disaggregation of data, the leaders were able to make further progress. Not everyone was ready. One person of color seemed to give up hope when he said, “White people are never going to change.” Many others expressed the same sentiments but in different ways. Some leaders were willing to confront racism but in the most politically expedient way possible, while at the same time trying to make sure that as they confront racism they didn’t point their fingers at themselves or their allies.

Dr. Peterson talked about the controversy when the data is difficult and why that elicits a different type of controversy:

You walk a fine line. You release it publicly, and there’s so many different letters. I get invited to PTAs. So, you walk in and, granted a lot of it is White, but there’s a range, and you go to report on the achievement of the school, and there’s a wide range in the audience, and you’re presenting data that are averages. Doesn’t talk about individuals there. I’ve worked with people who are African American, and they say, “That’s not my kid.” I’m showing devastating scores on average, and it’s very hard for them because other people may be thinking this is how all Black kids perform. It’s a stigmatizing thing; so how do you present it in a way that
says, “Here it is; it’s not everyone.” That’s what I tried to do, but it’s always a challenge, even when you’re talking to the public, the board, administration. They’re asking questions they need to ask as community members, but you have the press there and they’re, in its best form, asking good questions and in its worst form, giving a one-sided view. The person who writes the headline doesn’t write the article, so you have these goofy articles that are kind of good, but the headline is inaccurate. Redistricting people and moving them from schools is controversial. It’s cloaked in all types of things. Some people say, “I believe in it, but don’t do it to my child,” or, “I believe it, and I’m not worried about race, but I’m worried about income levels mixing.” They cloak racism in that. The tide has swung, because in the beginning, people were not talking about racism as an impact, because they wanted to believe it wasn’t race, it was other things causing inequity. I think now, more often than not, people are at least incorporating racism. There’s also a difference in commitment. The times have changed. Redistricting is pretty controversial, moving kids and programs around. Moving middle school from junior high model and back to middle school. Getting rid of a program that people have a lot of … Once a program is put in place, it becomes the program, and even if it’s not working, there’s a lot of allegiance to it. People believe in it. It has its own life. If you show the data, that it’s not effective … So there was an earn-learn program that had a lot of allegiance to it, a combination of elementary and high school. The data just didn’t show it to be that successful, so that was really controversial. A lot of board members on both sides of the issues. One called, asking how they could be sure if I was telling the truth. He wanted to meet with me and make sure I was going to do it right. I said, “No, we aren’t doing that. Believe in me or not, I have to do my job and can’t be influenced.

It was clear to me in these interviews that a few White liberals have problems confronting racism in themselves and in the systems they represent, even if those systems exist to promote equality and justice. But it was also clear from district leaders who identify as people of color that racism was no doubt something they wanted to openly confront directly with the institution and with certain individuals. The essence of this work is just that, confronting racism as leaders. To eradicate racism, one would have to admit that it is there. It takes courage to acknowledge racism, and, therefore, it takes courage to end it.
I was particularly struck by Louise Woten, a longtime school board member, who offered a unique perspective, when I asked her if the confronting racism at LSCHS was difficult:

MC: It’s hard in this work.

LW: That’s initially why I didn’t want conversations on race. A younger person could deal with it, but for me, I dealt with negatives—my parents being born and raised in the South. Vicariously, I got very angry when I read about how people were treated. Some was my own personal experience with racial discrimination in the high school and other places. I had buried a lot of it, because you can’t wear it on your sleeve. You’ll just be an angry Black woman or person. So, I buried it very deep in order to survive and to raise my daughter to be a strong person. To talk about it and bring it up made it worse than when it actually happened. I couldn’t find an apartment in Evanston: one, because I was a single female and also a single Black female. I didn’t go directly to college; I went to secretarial school. I was turned down from one because they said they didn’t accept Black students because they couldn’t find them jobs. “We don’t hire colored.” So, I’ve personally experienced some of that. So all that pain was there. I didn’t want to get involved in the conversation because I didn’t want the anger to come out and then have me project that onto some other White people who were good and had nothing to do with what happened to me, my parents, and their parents. It’s really painful, if you think about it. So, for me, I said, “Hey, leave it where it is.”

MC: Any of those feelings come up when some of the White people said things like “bright flight”?

LW: It wasn’t so much that infliction of pain. The old wounds came back. I thought about my experience at the high school. It was the new pain; so that wasn’t so bad compared to the old pain.

Some district leaders have been on record stating that measures like detracking were not in the best interest of students of color or White kids. The thoughts of a few on record—which were not disclosed in these interviews but were delivered on the night the school board took the vote to adopt the superintendent’s recommendation—were that the curriculum would be watered down at the expense of students of color. There were other concerns from White district leaders that students of color would not be able to perform
in such rigorous environments and that would destroy their academic careers, because they would only be able to perform up to the standards of the regular course(s).

Ben Davidson, a school board member, raised the question of academic rigor, a frequent argument against detracking:

I certainly credit the intentions and the need. I appreciate the persistence of the problem, and I appreciate the intention of the effort. I think it’s simplistic, that, frankly, anything that begins when our kids are 14 years old is going to have pretty limited utility. Making the curriculum more challenging for all students is absolutely right. I think one of the things … The lack of rigor in regular classes—and some honors—was appalling. I also answer these as a parent and board member, so I’ve seen when my son, when we decided to bring him from geometry honors to regular geometry, the persistence of the problem, and I appreciate the intention of the effort. Maybe I’ll be proven wrong, but I find it hard to believe the courses are being taught at the honors level. It is, to me, that human nature is to go toward the middle. It seems very difficult to overcome that tendency. So, I worry about the kids at both ends, because if you teach toward the middle, I worry you’re swamping the kids at the bottom, while boring the kids at the top.

Many leaders remarked that there were certain parts of this community that did not want these types of changes to be made. This segment of the community saw the high school as a place where their talented students would be challenged and excel academically. They were fine with the systems just the way they were. Why not? The system was working quite well for White students; they didn’t mind that there wasn’t enough concern about what this system was doing for students of color. Among these parents, either there were inherent beliefs that students of color were not smart, could not do the work, and were appropriately placed, or people just didn’t seem to care. There were community leaders who knew something needed to happen, but wondered what could be done without upsetting all of the White parents who would be opposed to these changes.

Jenna Craig, a district leader, fell on the other side of the fence:
Generally, I’m extremely hopeful and very optimistic that, over time, and I don’t
know how much time, we’re going to see a real change in achievement … Growth
in achievement of kids of color, who are now getting access to not only a more
rigorous curriculum, which is, of course, the first thing that’s necessary, but also, I
think because of the whole earned-honors structure, the fact that we are building
in the skill set and practice with the skill set into our earned-honors assessment
that everybody has to take. Every student in humanities knows what a DBQ is as a
freshman. I think these are all very good things, and ‘m hopeful that we’re going
to see some positive growth. And I have absolutely no concerns, zero concerns,
that we’ll see any decline in the so-called top 5 percent, based on whatever
measurement tool you want to use. I think those kids will continue to perform at a
very high level, and when you’re 98th percentile, you can’t go much higher,
right? I’m optimistic; I’m thrilled.

Despite this controversy, not one district leader walked away from confronting the
racism within the school and community, but I was reminded by more than a few that I
had promised to keep these comments anonymous, implying that there was risk in
exposing their views. For some, they did not want to imply that their neighbors or
colleagues were guilty of racism or racist acts. At this point in the interviews, I felt like
we were in a confessional, where some sinners were coming to confess their deepest and
darkest secrets about racism in this community. The secret: there is institutional racism at
work and possibly some racists who live in the community. For equity leaders whose
hearts are in the right place, it is hard to admit that there is a part of you that you deplore.
The confrontations in these interviews were external, and systemic, and not personal. But
if we are all honest about this, into the American fabric is woven racism, sexism, ageism,
homophobia, and other biases. I will say more about the implications of this in Chapter 5.

When the district administration made the recommendation to the school board to
detrack, the administration revealed a dirty little secret. The secret was that, for too long,
the school was indirectly engaged in institutional racism and needed to change. As the
administration proposed such a change, it highlighted deep-seated beliefs that certain
pockets of people were satisfied with the achievement gap at the local high school. There seemed to be a set of beliefs that “those kids” just weren’t good enough. The administration undressed these beliefs with their recommendation to de-track, and when the school board voted unanimously to restructure, the school board members also communicated the same message.

The superintendent spoke of public meetings in which it was alleged that people of color are inferior:

I’ve also learned many White people do harbor beliefs that they somehow feel people of color aren’t equal. I’ve heard things said in public meetings. I’m not just mind reading; they clearly say that. That’s pretty shocking. I’ve also learned even when something is being implemented beautifully, given the ups and downs of any new implementation, that when people feel their Whiteness is threatened, they will want things to fail. So, in this case, we’re doing assertive equity work, and there are people who want it to fail. I said in a meeting recently to a few trusted colleagues: “This is amazing to me. Why would anybody want this to fail?” One of my Black colleagues looked down the table and said, “Are you really surprised?” And it drove home an important lesson for me, because it seems counter to the human experience and counter to what any human being would want for all human beings, and I think I can explain it … For some inexplicable reason, our efforts to do right by all kids are met by some people who openly want it to fail. That, sometimes, as a human being and a leader, is hard for me to deal with.

It takes courage for White liberals to confront their own racism and the racism of their communities. It requires transparency and openness about racism and who can be racist, a dialogue which must be held to move forward. If a person is White, that means they have given away the dirty little secret that White liberals don’t want to admit—they are not immune from racism. And, for many people of color, if they want to engage in a conversation about race and racism with White liberals, this means they have implicated their White liberal neighbors in racism, although their children played together growing up. These have both personal and professional implications.
Lori Scott, a school board member, commented on the underlying racist content of arguments in favor of keeping the straight-honors classes. She adds a little zinger, when she says that while sitting in on her son’s honors class, she realized that the class was neither that challenging or special:

You know, look, I have lived here for 24 years. Race was not off my radar. I didn’t think that it was never an issue, and I can’t say that running for the board changed anything. Nothing was a surprise for me. You’re an idiot to run for the LSCHS school board and not appreciate that race is on the radar. That doesn’t make it any easier. There’s a difference between not being surprised and something just … So anyway … to continue, I wanted to make that point because my son was in the first year that they shrunk the straight honors to the top 10 percent. So, there’s all this stress among certain, mostly White, parents that their kid had to be in that straight-honors section. It was very interesting. I tried desperately to stay away from those conversations, but it was very hard. Everybody wanting to retake the EXPLORE … It was weird, definitely weird. And then the year went on and lots of people tried to talk about how that top 10 percent in that class would’ve generated such brilliant insights and the kids there … The discussion was so fabulous, which I always find very weird. After sitting in on my son’s humanities class and thinking there are some of the most annoying kids here, and also some kids who never had two cents to say, there was nothing really different about that class than the mixed classes. And that was compelling to me when it came time to address the slightly bigger decision of eliminating that distinction between the top 10 percent and those between the 40 to whatever range.

When district leaders discussed community resistance to the plan to detrack, the personal narratives of people of color began to conflict with the narratives of Whites. “There are racists all over this community, but we are not supposed to admit to that,” one district leader said. Some leaders began to talk about the folks they have known for years who had stopped talking to them. A district leader commented that some of the people they worshipped with continued to worship but lost their personal relationships with them. “I just couldn’t believe it,” one person said, adding, “There are just some people around here who don’t want people of color to have anything, and that’s sad.” The covers about equality and openness were being pulled off. As some leaders commented on this, I
could tell that they were upset. Some grew teary-eyed, and others spoke with a matter-of-factness that would enlightened any skeptic about the reality of racism in this community.

Carolyn Gaines, a Black woman, talked about her response to the hateful and hate-filled resistance:

Before the vote, there were so many people that came to the board, to the podium, to speak. People sent emails that were offensive, so offensive that I couldn’t even believe it. One of the things I struggle with is that people assume I vote this way because I’m Black. Then my colleagues are White and they vote this way because the data support it. I’m strictly voting because I’m Black. I haven’t read any of the literature that says detracking is good, or I haven’t listened to administration talk about their experiences and why they think it’s good. Before the vote, I struggled with trying to understand why it is that White people just cannot broaden their lenses. Why can’t they broaden their lenses, because I feel that I’m a very fair person—Black, White, Asian, whatever. I’m not going to just listen to a story and say, “Oh, they’re Black …” But I don’t think my White colleagues on the board have enough broad experience to do that. I think that comes with interacting with people. I’m a people person. I used to say the only person’s house I’ve never been in was a Chinese person. I pride myself on, “I’ve been in the home of an Indian.” I wanted to explore different cultures. I’m very open to different cultures. I’m very open to difference.

So I’ve found … it was extremely disappointing and almost heartbreaking that all I kept hearing, even though people weren’t saying it openly, I just kept hearing, “I don’t want these Black and Hispanic kids in the classroom with my White kids.” That’s what I kept on hearing. They kept saying the data doesn’t support that. The superintendent kept bringing data that did support that. I’m like, we can find data to support anything we want to say, but at the end of the day, someone has to lead. Our leader said this is the way we’re going, and we had enough data to support his direction. That’s the reason why I said, “Let’s go with it.” We’ve been doing so many other things that haven’t worked, and LSCHS is such a rich school, so rich. It’s nothing we don’t have for our students, so it does come down to something human taking place, and what do we need to do with that? It was just the whole struggle of “this has to pass; we have to do this.” We were in a place where we were going nowhere, with all the master’s degree teachers, master’s and PhD administration, we are stuck. We need to go someplace else. I knew that, and I was determined, and I worked hard, talking to my colleagues to get them to see we needed to go someplace.

Among leaders who spoke about the experience of facing opposition was Jenna Craig, who was on the school board. She learned the importance of her role as a White
woman in transformational change for race equity. She herself was transformed by the process:

On a personal level, I feel tremendously proud that I was part of the board that embraced the concept. Having said that, also on a personal level, I think the vote was in either November or December of that year (December 17, two years ago now). Well, I was invited to holiday parties that year, and literally, either somebody would lay into me in a non-pleasant way, or I’d feel that if I just joined another group chat, it would go quiet. People wouldn’t actually tell me what they were talking about, but clearly, they were talking about the school. That was icky. It was not pleasant. There are people I’m less friendly with now, and that’s okay.

I was also president of the board at the time, which was very hard because we had those meetings where we’d have a parade of community members who felt very strongly about whatever they felt. People were speaking on both sides, that he wouldn’t be quiet when his three minutes were up. And I didn’t know what to do; I felt disrespected, first of all, because I had the gavel. I turned to another board member and said, “What do I do now?” She said to throw it at him (laughs), which I did not do. But I understood the impulse. It was very, very hard. I don’t like conflict. I like everybody to get along. So, it was very strange to be in that position.

Well, one thing I’ve learned is there is a place for White people in this conversation. I think, initially, I thought it wasn’t my problem, and it wasn’t my role. I did what I did with my kids. I now realize that White people need to be aware of what they don’t have to deal with on a daily basis and need to think about it and think about where the unevenness is.

Facing resistance and opposition was painful for all and embittering for some.

The threat of White opposition was a long-term obstacle to proposing changes around racial equity, much less implementing such changes. Marilyn James, a longtime board member, stated:

The reason why detracking hasn’t been done before is because the White people didn’t want it. That was one of the reasons why they wanted their kids in AP and honors classes, to get away from “those kids.” There are still some parents that are that way, who don’t want it. Some people just want it all. They don’t want to give anything away. If this student is getting an A, they’ll take support away from somebody else to get an A+. They’re used to having it all. They want it all. They’re selfish. Don’t help anybody else. So, I really wasn’t surprised; I expected it. I was surprised by some of the support we did get from some of the parents. Sometimes, you say why and just assume everybody is one way—against it.
Surprisingly enough, there were some minority parents against it. I never did really get that. They were against not so much detracking, but the push to put students in the other courses.

Some of the resistance had its foundation in the intersection of race and class. Dr. Sam Davis recalls aspects of racism that he encountered, being new to the district:

By having tracking, we reinforced a sense of elitism and racism. Racism was on display many of those evenings. They got better at it, in terms of couching it. I found it all very fascinating because I’d heard this kind of talk the previous year when I was the person people would call if their kids missed the 95th percentile. They’d call to beg their White kids, typically, into straight-honors classes. The conversations … I remember one who said she didn’t want her son in with “those kids.” So, I probed and asked, “What kids?” and she said, “You know, those kids that don’t take school seriously” … “Okay,” I said, “who are those kids?” She said, “My son’s friends.” And I said, “Well, I’m not moving on this for just your kids. So, he’s going to be in there with his friends, in mixed-level honors.” But I heard much of that kind of talk as gatekeeper for that program. People said some horrible stuff, and the board members listened. I think some of the board was intimidated by the conversation. I think some people were in shock. I developed a model for the revised model. There was a Black man, who got on the mic at, like, 11:00 p.m. He turned to the audience of White people and said, “I went to Northwestern. I went to NU Law. I’m a lawyer, and I make my own hours.” The point was his mother wouldn’t have felt comfortable coming to the meeting. She would’ve been intimidated by the setup and remained silent. So, he felt he was speaking for her and folks who couldn’t speak up. He said he supported the program and was essentially very upset with the way his professional colleagues were behaving in the crowd. And that detracking was the right thing to do. Very powerful moment. It was telling that one of the folks comfortable enough to do that acknowledged race, position: “I can make my own schedule, so I can afford to do this. I don’t have to be at a job at 8:00 a.m.”—because, really, it was a lopsided conversation.

The superintendent has the last word on the subject of confronting racism following his recommendation to detrack freshman humanities. He held a unique perspective of what racism looked like within this fight. As he made the recommendation to the school board, much of the hate and the opposition was directed at him. As a White male speaking so openly about race and the need for change within the district, he was an open target of opposition and criticism. He speaks to the resistance to the plan, to the
importance of dealing with issues of academic access in race equity, and he speaks to the value and historic nature of the implementation of the plan to detrack:

I’ve been a superintendent for 24 years, and in every seat I’ve been in, the districts have changed a lot. But I’ve never been fortunate enough to achieve anything of the level of what we achieved here recently. And it’s manifesting itself in amazing ways. We now have over 800 students—40 percent are kids of color—taking AP courses, over half of the juniors and seniors. That wasn’t even in the culture when I came, and definitely not the culture to say kids of color belonged in those classes. I’m seeing so many dynamic things underway here. The district leadership team that’s in place, the supports that are profoundly important, the training we’re offering. How professional development revolves now around equity work. Sometimes, I gasp at what we’ve been able to achieve in this short amount of time. So, you’d think I was riding pretty high, I’d argue I’m having the most productive success in my entire career. But then I mentioned that it’s bifurcated, because at the same time, it has put me under constant challenge. Because there are people—I’d argue it’s why after Obama was elected we have a Tea Party or states petitioning to secede from the Union—because in this country, we can’t deal with race, and there are people in this community who can’t deal with it. There are leaders in the community who say I need to stop stirring it up, stop all the talk about race. There are people in this community who want to see our efforts for all students to get the best education fail.

As a liberal community, we believe in racial equity, equity, and excellence. We want the achievement gap to be closed. We want 100 percent of our students to succeed, graduate … 100 percent. But the problem is, for some, every time we make a move to implement something that would move us closer to those lofty goals, there’s resistance. I believe it’s because there’s a level of fear that, if we’re doing this, it’s only for kids of color. I believe there are people who would never even admit it to themselves, but who harbor beliefs that kids of color are equal or measure up or deserve the same opportunities. They really believe it’s a zero-sum game, and if we’re addressing the achievement gap then we must be taking something away from White kids. So it’s hard to square, because on one level, we all voice these things. This is interesting, by the way. I think we’ve done some innovative things. But we haven’t done anything “dangerous” or “drastic.” We’re implementing the best research and ideas about what works for educating kids. This is not drastic, risky stuff. But you would think … they refer to it as an experiment. We’re talking about human beings here, about children, about a blatant, obvious achievement gap and measurable inequities, and saying we can do better. I find it amazing that it’s so difficult to do something that’s innovative, but not drastic. And yet we treat every step we make as if this is the riskiest, most dramatic thing that anyone could do. When in fact, everything we do, we look to research. We need consistent curriculum. Higher expectations lead to higher achievement. We didn’t make this stuff up. We’re just trying to operationalize the best research.
The Superintendent

The leaders I spoke to all had one goal in mind: to eradicate the racial predictability in student achievement by using detracking as a strategy. However, they could not have achieved this result without the leadership of the superintendent. The plan was to be aggressive and strategic in the implementation of such a huge change. The literature suggests that detracking would be the way to begin district action toward racial equity, because it demonstrates that tracking hurts students of color. Within this discussion, many leaders held up the leadership and guidance of the superintendent, who was the strongest proponent of the move.

Within this discussion, Lorene Chamblis, a longtime board member, who was voted out, as she says, due to her vote for detracking, talked about the difference between the old and new superintendents:

There was a period where I was naïve. There was a period where I was dedicated to change, but we didn’t have the leadership to make that happen. When the former superintendent left, I was really worried about his replacement. I didn’t trust him. I was reluctant to make a commitment to him. He proved me wrong, and I’m ever grateful. I still think he has to tread carefully, but he was much more willing to move his feet than his predecessor was. I’m so glad that the current superintendent turned out to be a better man than I thought, but [the vote to hire him] was definitely along racial lines. I remember it was painful … I remember one board member was mad because it was along racial lines, and he didn’t want to be accused of being racist. He didn’t want to even talk about it. It was very bitter, and nobody paid any attention to it. The local newspaper didn’t even write about it. Nobody paid a bit of attention to the fact that the other candidate was a Black woman. I thought she could get the job done. I wasn’t worried at all. Even now, the current superintendent says things like, “Did that really happen?” or “Are you selling?” Like the racism in Florida that he saw there. He puts himself out there; you can talk to him and feel as though he’s not just patting you or being condescending. He doesn’t excuse much, and he’s moved his administration along in a way that is much more dedicated to what has to be done. Even though stuff still happens (laughs). You can teach me. I’m not stuck in a place, and my agenda was always for all kids. The work we needed to be doing was clearly to change this experience for Black kids at the school, and I was discouraged and depressed at what I found White people could do and say.
This is why I can’t deal with one of the board members at all … I just don’t respond because I don’t want to get near her. She’s a corrupt person. She really thinks … She’s so argumentative. She reminds me of my lawyer husband. You can get worn down. I’ll never forget, when she was running, she commandeered a little coffee or something with lots of minority parents there. She was quoting them as saying what a great place LSCHS was. She quoted someone saying all types of things I know she didn’t say. She tries to earn money from people for the Y, too … We had some things in common—these girls are brilliant—and my kids are smart; they did well. I did a lot of stuff with PTA. I think my problem was that I appeared too … That took a long time for me to accept, because I wanted to accept that Black kids were getting sufficiently challenged. That’s what’s so beautiful about the humanities program. It’s truly more integrated than anything we were doing before, and these kids can hang with each other, now that we don’t have Home Base.

The superintendent had only been with the district for seven years, yet the tracking and the achievement gap had been around for much longer. There had been earlier attempts to address the problem. Many district leaders who had been around for a while talked about several of the initiatives that had been tried to close the achievement gap. They had seen many programs and people come and go over the years. But many of the more seasoned leaders would admit that no move in the past had ever been this big or this bold. One sign that these earlier attempts had been examples of liberalism and had never gone to the root of the problem, as critiqued by CRT, is that there had never been any discussions of institutional racism among those who were trying to address the problem.

Marilyn James, also a longtime board member who is no longer seated, says:

I think it was a good effort just to detrack, period. Not just humanities, but all courses. I went to LSCHS, my daughter went to LSCHS, so it’s been a long struggle to have classes … The outside community is supposed to be diverse, but when you go to the high school in the classrooms, you can see it’s very segregated. My concern is that many times, minority students don’t get the opportunity to take other classes. Either because of test scores, or their parents don’t advocate for them. They just sign up, and they don’t think about taking higher-level courses; whereas, other parents almost insist their students get into
the higher courses. Sometimes, minority parents aren’t aware, aren’t concerned, and sometimes, it doesn’t make a difference to them. Even students sometimes avoid the higher classes because they don’t want to work harder. They fail to realize what they’re missing out on. So, those are primary concerns. I had mixed emotions about the detracking until … There had to be some supports in place, and once those were in place to help students, then I was in full support. Sometimes, students need tutors, assistance, and they often aren’t in a position to get them. Sometimes, it can work in the opposite. If you put a student in the class and they fail, it lowers self-esteem. So, I think without the supports, I don’t think it’d work. I always said they should have in-school support for students.

The previous discussions in the district had centered more on programs and other factors that were assumed to contribute to the gap. There was no discussion of race. There was no discussion of race as a factor in racial disparities in achievement. Most leaders offered up the rationale for the failure of these programs that the district did more talking than action. And others shared that the work done previously had actually laid the groundwork for the more structural changes and the changes in curriculum that are going on now.

One district leader, Sally Inez, talked about her experience as a former teacher and now administrator in the district. She introduced the subject of the processes and history involved in the adoption of detracking and introduced the issue of authenticity, which is an important aspect of transformational leadership. Like many leaders she also spoke of how the changes at LSCHS impacted her entire life:

My vantage point is unique. I know what was attempted, and now where we are … which is one good thing about being old. It used to be you were slotted so severely, so rigidly … When I started, you could only be in humanities honors. That was it. And then, about five years after I started here, it went to humanities for everyone. When I started, it was honors humanities, mixed-level history, and for students who were not quite capable, there was urban civilizations, which just sounds horrible now. And then we went to all humanities with multi, multi levels. We were doing the same thing, but just had one name. So, now I think we’re, for the first time, actually scraping away the topical Band-Aids and actually getting to what we need when we talk about rigorous curriculum, accessibility for all students, really working on instruction rather than just saying we’re working on
instruction. We’re looking at what kids can do, rather than what we’ve labeled them. So, from my vantage point … it may not be the total right way, but it’s authentic. And it’s not something we’ve been authentic about because we didn’t know how to be authentic in the past.

It’s impacted every single part of my life. From curriculum leader, structural leader, and hiring, releasing—which actually hasn’t been a problem. I have a vision for the department, that it will be all earned-honors. I don’t think it should just be the freshman experience, because it’s only three classes now. I mean freshman humanities and biology. There’s no reason why, at least in my department, because we’ve had mixed levels all of the time, that it can’t be you earn honors credit, not be an honors student. It’s impacted everything I do and every way I think about things. Sometimes, I have to remind myself that you’re going back to earning honors credit … It should be said it’s so easy, and it’s so not. Because I didn’t understand how much your own racial autobiography becomes part of this work. When I went to school, we were taught that kids are just kids. I don’t see Black kids, or White kids, or girls, or boys, because if you don’t, you’re missing the whole point. So, it’s hard, but it’s a good hard. This is the work you want to be doing. Anybody can look at a curriculum and say, “Let’s implement it and figure it out.” This is all-encompassing, and it starts on the personal journey.

Earlier efforts to close the achievement gap may have paved the way for detracking, but it was the new element, the new superintendent, who made the critical difference in the attempt beginning in 2010. In their interviews, there were many leaders who came back to the role of the superintendent, a White man, who has spoken openly and boldly about race and racism in schools. Some remarked on his personal characteristics, how he dared to call liberals out on their deep-seated beliefs and support of organizational structures that hurt students of color. They remembered how the superintendent talked about looking into the eyes of the students, recognizing their humanity and their potential. This is what drives him forward. Other leaders took a more process-oriented approach, saying that he is the right person for the job at the right time for detracking. After the previous superintendent resigned, the board was divided along racial lines when they hired the White male. But they soon discovered that he was the
right man for the job. He has been the one who has moved the district and has moved the board into looking and talking openly about race and achievement.

The superintendent knew this was the right thing to do and the right time to do it; although a topic like this can prove politically toxic. “Sometimes you’ve just got to do the right thing,” he remarked. There were many other district leaders who agreed with him. They knew something different needed to happen. A new approach was necessary. There was something bolder and bigger that needed to happen to show more than marginal gains or account for disappointing losses in the school’s achievement report. There was a leader who stated that he was behind the superintendent all the way, but that “We have never had this kind of leadership before.” It seemed the leaders I spoke with knew this was necessary, but they also knew why it had not been accomplished in the past, and some knew of the need for change but were skeptical about the particular solution of detracking.

The superintendent’s personal character became a positive factor in the struggle. He stated that he could not preside over an institution that was hurting kids, including students of color. He was bold and clear. One leader went as far as to say that this superintendent has sparked a citywide conversation about race. There are conversations about race being sponsored by the city and various community organizations. There are many members in the community who are now at a new place in their consciousness as it relates to race. And, interestingly enough, with the town being as diverse as it is, there has never been such an open dialogue about race among its residents. The superintendent changed that. He was bold and clear. It is clear that the superintendent brought this
conversation along and also was strong enough to bring bold changes to the freshman program.

The District Leaders

The leadership of the superintendent was critical to the project of detracking, but he could not have completed it successfully by himself. District leaders stepped up. One district leader noted that one thing this particular community was good at doing was talking, but this person concluded, “At the end of the day, someone has to lead.” This dissertation is about leadership. Several district leaders felt this community had been well versed in the problems with students of color for a long time. And, over the course of several years, many conversations were held, but there was no follow-up action. As stated earlier, programmatic changes were made and other initiatives targeted what is likened to the talented tenth among the students of color, but no changes were undertaken on a large enough scale to close the achievement gap.

The development of leadership was a process. One leader said they were all responsible for the lack of action up until that point, and that the leaders in the community should be ashamed of themselves. “Why did it take this long to make these changes?” one leader shouted. No one engaged in the proverbial “throwing the past district leadership under the bus,” but for many leaders of color, the frustration was palpable. Many leaders of color had been made cynical by the days of old when all we did was talk. “Now, we are actually doing some things, and it seems like White people don’t want that either. It’s all about me and mine. I want all of the pie and none for anyone else,” a leader of color lamented. These leaders’ level of frustration was strong, and they appeared to be grateful for the superintendent’s leadership. Those who had been
around for some time also struck me. Their past level of compliancy shocked me. But, as
I was once a teacher in this district, I recognized the commonplace attitude and inertia
regarding the situation in which the district had found itself.

The point is that district leaders did begin to lead. Jonathan Johnson, a board
member, commented on how he saw the new work going forward within the context of
larger issues facing students of color:

This whole problem has so many roots and causes, all deeply embedded in
society, and here we are, on our block, trying to take that on. The enormity of that
task has never been lost on me. In the past, that’s been an excuse for myself and
others to not take it on. It’s too big, you know? I don’t know how to approach it.
Where do we start, and what do you do? It’s been a reason to not take on the
problem. One of the things that has me really excited and committed to this work
is that you guys … (laughs) … meaning all of you: you, the superintendent, that
whole team, you have shown us a way to take it on, saying, “Here’s a way to
start.”

Just as the superintendent had personal qualities which furthered his leadership, so
did other district leaders. One of these personal qualities is the ability to be honest and
genuine. Carolyn Gaines, a longtime school board member, says:

It’s not hard to lead if you’re willing to be yourself, if you’re willing to speak
your truth, if you’re willing to listen, and share, and hear, and the leadership is
really not hard. I think it becomes hard because people get in relationships with
people and they don’t want to offend or hurt them. But leadership, true leadership,
is not hard at all. You just have to be real, to be willing to say things people may
not want to hear. Have to be willing to change; if you believe in your vision that
much, you have to be willing to change. If you think this person or situation is not
good, you’ve got to keep your eyes on the prize. I feel that … the superintendent
has, for example … I like his leadership style because he’s a servant-leader. I
think sometimes, he takes … I’m not sure he has the very best discernment. His
discernment, not that he’s not willing. He’s such a servant-leader and so open, but
he doesn’t have the discernment. I think, in terms of being a great leader, you
need to be able to discern. Discernment is important in a leader. Being a servant-
leader is important because you’re saying you’re willing to do what I’m doing,
and it’s not anything you wouldn’t do to help. As far as my role in being a leader
at LSCHS—President, and VP, and board member—that I just try to be myself
and speak truth to whoever it is. I don’t care who you are, I’m still going to speak
whatever truth that is. Whatever that interchange is we’re having, I’m going to always be truthful.

As the leaders began to lead, the responses from the community varied. It is interesting to note that these responses were not divided along racial lines. Their ability to deal with community response became a characteristic of these leaders. Many leaders were not bothered at all, while a few were deeply troubled and hurt, by the personal attacks. There were leaders of color who were not bothered at all and others who were, and there were White leaders who were not bothered and others who were a little concerned. The leaders who were not bothered spoke of an inner peace that kept them going when times were tough. And others commented on the fact that when you do the right thing, it doesn’t matter what people say.

A similar trait exhibited by the leaders for race equity at LSCHS was the quality of being grounded in their ethical sense as they handled the challenges in White communities around race. They appear to be grounded and guided by a moral compass that is larger than the policy initiative itself. They see these obstacles as mere bumps in the road as they seek to leave a world better than they’d found it. It was clear that some have professional training that equipped them with Teflon-like shields, but others were guided and protected by something very different, and that appeared to be doing what was right, no matter how loud some individuals in the opposition were as they attempted to make their points. Some leaders referenced the fact that “education is the civil rights issue of our time.” The images and experiences of district leaders who were growing up during the Civil Rights Movement certainly put their experiences into the right perspective as they related to the vicious attacks. The only problem is that one would not
expect such hostility to exist some 40 years after these issues were settled in Congress and the courts.

The personal drive and moral imperative of leading for racial equity seemed to be a central motivator of those who would admit this particular community still has a ways to go as it relates to racial understanding and healing. There seem to be remnants of fear and distrust among some community members who see their roles as protecting their property taxes instead of protecting the lives of students of color. One leader said that if this community did not do a better job educating students of color, there would be more deaths and senseless killings in the streets. These crimes would certainly have an impact on who would want to move and live in such a community. In the face of such sensationalist negativity, a personal center based on moral imperatives was a powerful force.

Leaders whom I interviewed stated that detracking was the right thing to do, although it was painful and messy. Their personal resolve afforded them the luxury to have peace in the midst of the storm. This peace is guided and sustained by personal convictions and personal mission. One leader stated, “This is why I am on this board. I am here because no one speaks up for these kids.” This reflects not just a policy decision, but a person who realizes that the decisions he or she makes as a district leader will have an impact on the lives of students, students who need advocates.

This sense of mission is expressed by the superintendent, who ties this sense directly to his journey:

When I write my own personal journey, I can highlight different places in that journey. Unlike some White people, who look back and think, Oh God, I was racist ...we all have shortcomings and don’t get it, but I think that even as young as I can remember, I was always trying to get it. I can think of some things I
thought and understood at 12 or in college that are different today. But I’ve always been on the journey. That drives and motivates me, but it’s not the only thing. A lot of external things motivate me, too. It sounds sappy, but you’d have to know me and follow me around to know I do look into the eyes of the kids every day. I make sure of it. That pushes me. They’re real human beings, and I’m around when they’re fooling around and having a good time or doing something they’re doing, things they shouldn’t be doing. I see them when they’re down, when there are conflicts. But the point is, I see them. So, looking into the faces of these kids every day pushes me. My colleagues push me. I’ve been blessed to be surrounded by amazing people with amazing insights and amazing determination. They won’t let me fail at this. They won’t let me not keep pushing on.

The district leaders and superintendent answered the imperative to lead by finding a starting point: detracking. They also had personal qualities and character traits which allowed them to persevere in the face of hostility and frustration.

**District Leaders: At the End of the Day, Someone Has Got to Lead**

Dr. Chris Peterson, a district administrator, knew detracking to close the achievement gap was an idea whose time had come:

I’m hopeful. Thirty years of being part of this community in either elementary or high school, I’ve seen initiatives. It’s not like this is the first time there’s an energy for this that new people have, because they didn’t see all the other cycles, so they think this is the first one. In the larger view, it’s not the first one. There’ve been efforts over time. I think this is an exciting one, I’m very hopeful. I also worry. It has potential for change. Certainly, more structural change than other attempts. I’ve seen structural changes like boundary changes. I’ve been involved in redistricting since the first time boundaries were changed. Beginning in the mid-80s, there were a number of times we redistricted, and the intent was, in a big way … When they desegregated, the intent was to put kids together and things change. There were some things that changed, but there was still a gap. Some of the initial research showed change in student perception, but not achievement, although there was improvement. This is going from schools that were all Black and all White, until students got to middle school. High school was always integrated … sort of. Those changes were redone over and over with the intent to make achievement rise. It made some differences. Certainly, there weren’t schools with all Black teachers and all White teachers. Since there was a different staffing structure and so on, but … achievement gaps, and each time we redid it, the hope was to continue the change. That’s at the elementary level. You’d hope over time, if you did make changes that it would affect the high school. There were changes but not significant enough to close the gap, so it didn’t result in changes at the high school.
The district leaders associated with making the changes to the freshman program consciously took on the burden of leadership. As stated above, many of them knew there would be fallout regarding race, even in a liberal community. In the face of obstacles, they followed the superintendent’s leadership and then led themselves. Many leaders referenced the superintendent’s passion and drive to make necessary changes. And they seemed to come to a place where they were convinced for themselves. They began to own the changes as leaders. Many of them commented on their desires to do something different and demand change. One leader noted that after 35 years of experience in the district, detracking was an idea whose time had come. It is safe to say that if the superintendent had not spoken up, the district could have been up to business as usual. But the superintendent did speak up, and district leaders followed him.

Transformational leadership came on board when the superintendent was hired. The achievement gap in this particular district had been around for decades, but with his hiring and the support of district leaders, LSCHS was caught in a perfect storm of change.

One longtime leader said, “You know what, at the end of the day, someone has to lead.” This person referenced this comment in speaking about the hostility and the hatred they had experienced as a result of these changes. This person, who has been a leader in the community for a number of decades, stated: “We are not in these positions to do nothing; if we see these problems, we have to address them. And I compliment the superintendent as a White male doing this work. It is commendable and courageous on his part, because I know White people are angry with him.”
The federal government mandated data to be disaggregated by race; the former superintendent retired; and the new superintendent identified himself as a transformational leader. This district had the right leadership at the right time, when sanctions were being placed on districts for not making adequate yearly progress in closing the achievement gap.

In addition to the mandated obligations, several leaders said they felt the kids needed a fair shot. “Why should their future be determined by a test they took on a Saturday that determines how they will fail or succeed at the high school? This is not fair,” one leader commented. This person was convinced that what was happening to students of color was unfair and impractical. Yet, while they spoke positively about leading for change, there were many references to the opposition, to the fact that there were community members who would see to it that these changes either would not last or that all the talk about race would have to end. Many leaders, who have worked in this district for years, were surprised by the community’s response, and others were not. I can see why many would be surprised; when there were no policy changes to “rock the boat,” there was no need for the community to rise up to defend White privilege, or their Whiteness as property. When the district began to defame the sacred cow of honors, many White people cried blasphemy and staged a revolt. The presence of leadership at all levels, starting at the top down, made it the right time to go against this tide of hostility.

As one leader noted, LSCHS had not been succeeding in its struggle to close the achievement gap—“we were going nowhere”—despite the district’s financial support. Once a superintendent with a clear vision and the courage to make the difference was in place, with a capable and committed leadership team, the district’s human and material
resources could be turned effectively to the task at hand. This leader captured the essence of the primary lesson for a district like LSCHS—having the human and financial resources to pull this off is one side of the equation, but leadership is the other side. It is an important distinction in that there is talent and money available for attacking the problem at LSCHS; the only thing left to do was to lead.
CHAPTER 5: LEADERSHIP LESSONS: USING DETRACKING TO PROMOTE RACE EQUITY

Introduction

In the larger political context, the nation is struggling with shifting racial demographics. Many schools are also faced with these challenges and changes. As a result, teachers, administrators, and all those impacted by school policy will have to wrestle with the most effective ways to run schools and teach children who are different from the White norm, those who are Black and Brown. Schools that have been historically White and middle-class are going to begin to look more Black and more Brown. It is, therefore, critical to make sure that the needs of students who are not White and not middle-class are met. Schools must work to strengthen the foundation of democracy, which is education. The story of Lake Shore Community High School is an important one because it describes and foretells the struggle of many communities that face demographic changes and racially based achievement gaps. The story offers an example of one community that successfully implemented serious changes in the interest of race equity.

The discussions I had in this study are microcosms of the larger social and political conversation about race. The larger, national conversation is the context for change at LSCHS; conversely, what happened at LSCHS became part of the national context of working for race equity in education. One of the contributions made by the experience of detracking at LSCHS, as illustrated by the interviews, is the recognition of the importance for change-makers to confront their own racism. In digging deeply, some district leaders at the school used counter-storytelling and freed themselves to act
courageously. The individuals I spoke with are on a continuum on their racial journeys. There are White people who are more racially conscious than some people of color, and there are others who are still learning about the impact of race. There are also some people of color who are fierce advocates of Black and Brown children, while others put the majority of the responsibility for the achievement gap on parents. In either case, the implications are important in that they reflect the larger cultural contextual conversation on race, privilege, and achievement.

Identifying oneself as a leader for racial equity implies that there are inequities; this would also imply that there is racism. Some would argue that racism is over, but there is a lot of data that tell us something is at work in our community, and if that something isn’t institutional racism, then people of color must be inherently inferior to Whites. If this is not the case, there must be a role that race plays in schools, which tells us that racism is alive and well. It takes genuine leadership, particularly for White equity leaders, to admit the role of race in their lives and to struggle with the role race plays in the life of a person of color. I think it is easy for White liberals to point to other White liberals and call them racist, but it takes a mature leader to admit to his or her own racism.

**Characteristics of Leaders and Conditions That Fostered Race Equity at Lake Shore Community High School**

Leaders at LSCHS demonstrated qualities and characteristics which made possible the implementation of a detracking strategy to further race equity.
Confronting Racism

Although acknowledging racism is difficult, many leaders for race equity at LSCHS did so, despite cultural messages that said they shouldn’t admit to being any of the other “-isms,” and that accepting the label of racist would be to accept the one “-ism” that is the most deplorable. This is exceptionally difficult for communities where people pride themselves on their diversity, even though that would suggest they are open and comfortable with the conversation about race. What this study uncovered is that although these leaders have varying degrees of comfort discussing race, their levels of comfort and understanding do not represent the community at large.

Many district leaders noted there were people they had known for years, people who they thought were comfortable and open regarding diversity. Yet, when the district took steps to detrack, which would eliminate de facto segregation at the local high school, these individuals’ true colors came to the surface. They could not hold up under the weight of institutional racism. The work on racial equity at the local high school caused schisms in churches and hostile postings in the blogosphere.

Confronting racism is stressful and potentially life-threatening. The doctors who performed the autopsy on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. discovered that Dr. King had the heart of a 65-year-old man. I can only imagine how the stress, anxiety, and challenges of his struggle for racial equity during those times of extreme and openly hostile racist attacks took a toll on Dr. King.

Leaders at LSCHS had their own degree of personal pain and anguish as it relates to leading an effort to detrack for the benefit of students, although times have changed since Dr. King’s era. The majority of LSCHS leaders did not express any concern over
the backlash in the community over the changes in the school’s curriculum. There is still a degree of hostility, but it is no longer politically correct to be openly racist. The racism and hostility endured by these leaders was minimal compared to what Dr. King experienced, in that Dr. King eventually lost his life while most of the LSCHS leaders dismissed the racist folks as being crazy or ignorant. It almost seems as if these people’s opinions are not legitimate because they are racist.

The issue of race could not be ignored by leaders at LSCHS. One district leader was stunned by the reality of overt comments spewed by liberal Whites who openly told him they hoped this program (which is designed to help Black and Brown kids) would fail. In other words, they wanted Black and Brown kids to fail or wanted the efforts of Black and Brown kids to fail. I can’t imagine which one is worse. Another district leader says she believes that “White liberal communities are just as racist as any other community.”

Admitting Racism

As a student of Critical Race Theory (CRT), I see how at LSCHS, counter-storytelling on the part of leadership, especially White males, altered my own story and allowed me to work more effectively for change. At LSCHS, admitting the existence of both community and personal racism was a critical step in change for race equity. The comments made often gave me an indication as to why some individuals were further along on their journeys than others. Those district leaders who responded very personally in my interviews were more likely to see more of a personal and moral connection to the journey of racial equity. One aspect seemed especially noteworthy for me on my own journey: I was struck by the powerful effect I felt in hearing White males speak openly
and honestly about race. This was particularly important for me because throughout this study, I was constantly deconstructing my father’s words: “Never trust a White man.”

I was struck by White males’ willingness to talk about their own privilege, even though they do not lead stereotypically privileged lives and have worked very hard in life.

My personal narrative was interrupted when I asked a school board member to admit that he was a racist. I wasn’t looking for him to admit that he had participated in a rally for the KKK or to confess that he had meant a person of color harm. But I wanted him to admit the racism that is reflected in the literature. Dr. Beverly Daniels Tatum, in her text “Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?” says White people who benefit from the privilege of being White are defined as racist. I had never personally been in company with a White person who admitted that they benefitted from racism or systemic oppression. When I asked this person the question, his response was striking:

MC: I remember the second day of Beyond Diversity, where you addressed me directly, saying that you were a White male, willing to admit you were racist. Remember? That gave me hope, because I did not believe, the way I grew up, that White people, particularly men, could ever get to that place of racial consciousness. For you to be able to say that in front of a group of teachers, administrators, and other board members, that was pretty powerful.

IJ: That event had a huge impact on me. It was like, choose your metaphor (laughs): slap in the face, pour a bucket of water on me. It was very, very impactful for me. I realized that, oh my God, I’ve wandered around life as an upper-middle-class White guy, never really fully understanding or recognizing the privilege that I had, and it forced me to think about that. And, of course, on the heels of that is the immediate question—why shouldn’t everyone have these privileges? I like having them. I benefit from them.

I found this particular exchange transforming for myself. It allowed me, as a leader for racial equity, to believe in the process. As I discuss later in this chapter,
individual commitment is crucial to leadership for race equity. This exchange gave me the faith to believe that this school district could honestly lead for racial equity if Whites would admit to the existence of systemic racism. I grew up as a kid believing that all Whites were racist. As I discuss later, I thought many Whites tolerated people of color but did not like them. As I grew older, I discovered my childish intuitions were both right and wrong. The fact that all Whites benefit from racism was something reflected in the literature. But that Whites have negative perspectives of Blacks and other people of color was something I believed as a child that was also confirmed in this study. While CRT confirmed my infantile intuitions about the permanence of racism in society, I wonder what, as a child, led me to think that way. Yet I found that personal belief informed my thoughts, judgments, and interactions with this school official. With these ideas as my cultural and racial baggage at work, I did not believe this board member would ever admit to something like that, but he did. He did it in a big way, in front of other board members, teachers, and administrators.

When I asked him about this in the interview, I was, once again, refreshed by his honesty and thoughts about racial equity. And, because of that, I believe it makes him one of the strongest advocates for racial justice this district has to offer. If district leaders have the personal commitment and are willing to admit or acknowledge that these things have both theoretical and real-life implications, I believe this is where theory meets practice (praxis) or informs practice in powerful ways.

I was also struck by Dr. Davis’s confession that he had not been required to talk about race in any deep way as a White male and as a professional in a nearby metropolis. I was refreshed by his honesty and thoughts about racial equity. What does it mean that
White males are not routinely asked to participate in such introspection and self-evaluation? Dr. Davis somewhat mocked his experience as a White male in urban settings, who had never once had to talk or think meaningfully about race, even though his environment would seem to demand it. His introduction into LSCHS was one where he would have to bare his racial soul in front of a roomful of strangers, who would in the end evaluate him. I imagine this would be difficult for any new administrator. This leader had to pass an “equity challenge” of sorts to be a legitimate administrator in the district:

My entree into the district four years ago was … First thing I did was I attended the Beyond Diversity seminar as a White dude, living in the town by the lake for several years, and I worked in the south suburbs of Chicago. I’d never engaged in conversations around race and equity at that level. If anything, having worked in the south suburbs, race was very pathologized when it came to academic achievement. Like how can we inoculate non-White kids to be successful in school? Bunch of different programs, and that was the extent of the conversation. Never asked to think about my own race, never asked to think about myself as a White man. Never asked to do any of that.

This exchange is important because, once again, it highlights the importance of racial leaders digging deeply into their own racial consciousness and thinking about the role of race in their professional practices. The personal self is not disconnected from the professional self. When Whites and people of color can process through race and the implications of what it means for policy and instruction, they can be better leaders.

School board members and the district administrator were candid about the fact that they had never talked openly about race (or never had to); they were all of a sudden thrown down a deep well of racial conversation and action. This is a large leap for people who are just coming to a certain level of racial understanding in their own lives, who are also then required by their professions to implement a racially conscious system. One has
to recognize that this demands a huge learning curve, an important prerequisite to successful change for race equity at LSCHS.

**Recognizing the Denial of Racism**

The leaders at LSCHS were able to negotiate the questions of academic rigor and others that can obscure racism. Without an understanding of racism, they might have been drawn into blaming students and their families for the achievement gap, but instead, they held fast to the understanding that racism, which is permanent, is the root cause of the racially based achievement gap.

**Commitment to Race Equity**

The cultural change to confront racism as the right and courageous thing to do works to the advantage of racial equity leaders, but this is nevertheless work that requires a deep and long-term commitment. Several leaders spoke openly and candidly about their convictions and their missions. They were on a journey for which no one can predict the length.

One White leader spoke about her long-term activism in the past and how her work has been transformed:

I went from a period of working in civil rights with the NAACP to doing a whole lot of reading—Invisible Man and stuff—that I became so angry, very angry. Another part was that, and this is where critical thinking comes in, I learned from the reading that we wouldn’t be where we were if not for some courageous White people. You learn that everybody’s not a demon. There are good people, and you need to work with them. That’s true of the NAACP, slaves making it to the North. Frederick Douglass wouldn’t have had the audience he had if not for abolitionists who put their lives on the line. I try to teach my daughter that. We say, “White folks this, and White folks that,” but if you really think about it, you think there are some good people on both sides. That was confirmed for me … I think part was reading and part of it was associations. When I worked for the NAACP, there were some White people at the conventions, marching with us, driving us places.
This leader demonstrates the commitment shown by leaders for race equity at LSCHS. Such long-term commitments gave leaders a sense of perspective. This leader has had a variety of experiences in civil rights that fuel and aid her work now. She has perspective, and her commitment gives her a tough-enough exterior to get things done with purpose and morality. Her commitment puts the noise of controversy into perspective. When a leader has spent her entire life working for equal rights and justice, she operates from a kind of moral- and purpose-driven mindset that enables her to move forward. This does not imply that people who are bothered by the politics and the controversy are any less driven by purpose. However, those in this study who aren’t take the perspective that opposition to racially conscious polity was once a lot worse than it is now.

I heard a comment from a board member who has been around for a while. This particular person seemed to know that more needed to be done to help students of color maximize their potential in the district. This person was also the one who commented to another school board member that once they began running for the school board, they would learn things about their community that they wished they would have never found out. This board member had always wanted bolder action on behalf of the district’s most vulnerable students. They mentioned being appreciative of the former superintendent, but they also knew that more had needed to be done. He is in this for the long haul:

LSCHS is such a rich school, so rich. It’s nothing we don’t have for our students, so it does come down to something human taking place, and what do we need to do with that? It was just the whole struggle of “this has to pass; we have to do this.” We were in a place where we were going nowhere, with all the master’s degree teachers, master’s and PhD administration, we are stuck. We need to go someplace else. I knew that, and I was determined, and I worked hard, talking to my colleagues to get them to see that we needed to go someplace.
Openness to Risk and Vulnerability

Most of the district leaders may have spoken briefly about the racism of others and the discomfort they experienced, but one particular leader, whose comments appear in Chapter 4, had more of a significant setback than any other. This leader believes that after 20 years of service, she lost her seat on the school board because of her courage to vote for detracking and the freshman restructuring proposal. She experienced hurt and disappointment as she campaigned and then lost. In her comments, she is hurt and upset, but knows and believes she did the right thing. She voted in favor of restructuring freshman year to give all students access to a challenging curriculum. She voted for the ideals of the community, but the community turned its back on her and its ideals. She was the only board member of color to get backlash over her vote. She highlights (as the only victim of political fallout) the hypocrisy of the community. She goes on to say she raised two daughters in the community and actually believed in her heart that the community would stand with her in the quest to give all students access to the courses to which her daughters had access. But she did not get enough votes to sit another term.

I believe her vulnerability in the political climate makes for such an authentic assessment of the community anxiety. She went to varying lengths to be honest about her reflections on the election and the vote, but continued saying that the wound cut deep. She closed that section of the interview by sharing the following thoughts, including the risk of losses suffered by Black students following school integration:

Lake Shore Community takes such pride in the fact that they desegregated first … all that noise, and there’s nothing there. When we look back on the Kaufman days, it was pretty controversial, and the Black community in Lake Shore Community has been robbed of its community school and library. They’ve complained about it, but no one took it very seriously. Don’t know if you know that history. When there was a West Side library, bit after bit, that made the West
Side a more balanced community. There are no grocery stores. It’s really … but in this case, it’s interesting because it wasn’t taken seriously. I appreciate you asking me. I’d love to have a discussion as well.

Creative Response to Frustration and Resistance

During the course of the interviews, many district leaders, both on the board and staff, kept referencing the work and leadership of the current superintendent. He displayed the important ability to respond creatively, or transformatively, to obstacles and resistance. He refers to himself as a transformational leader and, therefore, he expects times to be hard and things to be difficult. This controversy was put into perspective when he said the eyes of the students and staff kept referencing the work and leadership of the current superintendent:

Finally, I think the resistance I’ve met pushes me. I know that resistance is everywhere, not just this school. And I think it’s important there are schools that break through, that serve as models for other communities, that we can create racial equity, and we can really do what’s right for all kids. The resistance to that pushes me … it reminds me this isn’t easy work. If anybody or I just rolls over and gives up on it, then nobody anywhere will ever break through. I think this is the place and the school where we can break through. I have the best job in the world. I feel so fortunate to be here and be able to be part of what’s going on here, part of what the promise of what can happen here. I come here every day, motivated, thankful to be here, excited about what we’re doing, and energized that I couldn’t be doing anything more satisfying in the world than what I’m doing right now.

A Moral Center

Leading for racial equity requires a more genuine level of transparency and openness. It also requires a person to be honest about being impacted by racism, which some consider the worst “-ism.” This means that if a person is White, he or she must admit to the biases and prejudices that are reflected in our media and driven by our culture. Beverly Daniels Tatum writes that all men are sexist and all Whites are racist because men benefit from sexism just as Whites benefit from racism. All of the White
people I interviewed talked about being impacted by racism and were honest about being
affected by race in their lives. No Whites denied the influence of race in schools; they
debated the significance of the breadth of the role race played, but none denied the
existence of racism in the district.

This honesty and openness is where the personal meets the professional, which
most of these leaders, who were responsible for implementing such change, think is
important. These district leaders did not divorce the personal from the professional.
During the interviews, they reached into their personal experiences and connected them
to the professional context in which they were trying to work. One district leader began
the conversation by talking about his experience in the school and what that meant for
how he entered the conversation as a leader who I would describe as being cautious about
placing a lot of focus on race:

My perspective is based on my experience here in regular and honors programs,
as well as what I’ve learned since I’ve left. First things first, there’s an issue with
regard to access. Let’s be clear about the access to honors—for so long, it was felt
in Black communities that it wasn’t for “us.” I can’t speak directly to it because I
didn’t feel this way, but it was like honors stuff was for “them.” When I came, my
perspective was that my parents knew how to navigate and were very in tune with
my abilities. They knew I was capable. I just didn’t work. In spite of that, they
pushed because they knew that even in a situation that I was challenged, I’d be
able to do well in honors classes. I kept a low B average in honors. A lot of times,
I got Cs. It’s because of my parents believing I could be there that I stayed. I used
that in my analysis of the detracking system.

According to school board members and staff, similar moral qualities were
important to the struggle at LSCHS. According to them, the inner drive and convictions
of the superintendent as a leader are what actually fueled the work. In his interview, the
superintendent states that the things that drive and push him are intangible and come from
a moral place that isn’t out of a leadership strategy manual, but from the heart. At LSCHS, leading for the cause of racial equity required heart and passion.

**Egalitarian**

What leader voluntarily jumps into the ring of fire simply to change the life trajectories of kids, especially kids of color? What White male leader is able to get this done without a paternalistic, White-man’s-burden approach? Some White leaders will do this without acknowledging their own baggage or pathological frames for wanting “to save the lost” or “to make a difference.” What these leaders fail to recognize is that work done from a paternalistic stance can be more offensive than work which is openly racist. The language representing the ideas of the superintendent was not paternalistic or demeaning, but hopeful, optimistic, and human.

**Leaders Must Choose to Lead**

The matter-of-fact attitudes of these experienced leaders is refreshing in a culture where people are more inclined to do what is politically correct and astute in exchange for their personal ambitions and satisfactions. As stated earlier, the work of racial equity is politically toxic for the status quo. Most districts work to figure out how they can avoid tackling such controversial issues. But the fact that these leaders thought it was important to do this is the first step; having the courage to actually get it done is the next and most important step.

**Moving When the Time is Right**

Confronting racism in a time when the country has elected and subsequently re-elected the first Black president and has been in a dialogue about being a post-racial America, we can talk about how far the country has come, yet in the same breath talk
about the lack of racial progress. Many people of color would say that racism has changed; racism is more covert than overt as it was during the Jim Crow era. And some would say that covert racism (for instance, when denial of racism is the tactic of racists) is the worst type of racism in that it is more subtle and deceptive. This racism is elusive and more difficult to identify, but at the time of detracking at LSCHS, leaders recognized they lived in an era when the possibility of change for race equity was better than in the immediate past.

The timeliness of leadership was key at LSCHS, where there was a history of a racially based gap in student achievement and a history of attempts to bridge that gap. The district leaders, veteran teachers, and administrators who have had experience working in this school and community have spent many years trying various approaches to close the gap and address the problem of racial predictability in student achievement. But, the interviews point out that it was at the moment when this superintendent could make the boldest move to address this issue that effective change was possible. The change was a long time coming, but as one leader put it, it was time to bridge that gap. The district leaders, veteran teachers, and the superintendent built on the previous work of the district. The shared sentiment is that the previous work paved the way for the current work to detrack. A district leader commented:

The previous boss, what appears to be happening is that the sun has set for you, and it’s rising for me. Rising, I expect action. I don’t see what it is you’re doing to improve student achievement, and that’s what I’m about. That’s why I was so hyped in 2001. So, we had that tension right off the bat. I told him, “This is not acceptable; it’s not enough. Look at this data.” Grades, test scores … and then you convene the Minority Student Achievement Network. Okay, I’ll roll with that for a little bit. Then I saw it wasn’t going really anywhere. We don’t need more talking groups; we need an action group.
The former boss talked a good talk, but the change was so slow and truly incremental, if that. A new group has to be cleaner, and I think the current superintendent has done that. I think the thing that was good about me was I was pretty consistent and I was there. I had enough experience to know what we needed to do. You need somebody like me, and I’m trainable. You can teach me, I’m not stuck in a place and my agenda was always for all kids. The work we needed to be doing was clearly to change this experience for Black kids at the school, and I was discouraged and depressed at what I found White people could do and say.

Longtime district leaders knew the time had come for change and that leadership was needed to get the job done, but even here the permanent racism in the LSCHS community created obstacles. The vote to hire the new superintendent was along racial lines. White board members voted in favor of the current superintendent, while the board members of color voted in favor of the other candidate, a Black woman. It was a difficult time for the school board, and training and healing needed to come out of it, but the leaders I spoke to were all grateful that the current superintendent was the right person for the job. The previous superintendent put some things in place and built consciousness and awareness around the achievement gap. This is huge, but did not bring an end to the persistent tracking and academic levels that were complex, difficult to understand, and had been around for countless years. As one district administrator observed:

My vantage point is unique. I know what was attempted, and now, where we are … So now, I think we’re, for the first time, actually, scraping away the topical Band-Aids and actually getting to what we need to when we talk about rigorous curriculum, accessibility for all students, really working on instruction rather than just saying we’re working on instruction. We’re looking at what kids can do rather than what we’ve labeled them. So, from my vantage point … it may not be the total right way, but it’s authentic.

This particular leader has been around for nearly 35 years, which speaks to the leadership quality of persistence, discussed below. Her description of levels and tracks, I would argue, are appropriately called Band-Aids. This person also talks about being
authentic in the past. These comments are important because they indicate that while the problem had been around for years, and some had been around with them and knew more needed to be done, people just were not willing to go there. In the liberal manner, over time, the district began to make incremental moves that raised awareness about a blatant problem that no one really talked about. Finally, the district began to talk, abandoning the incremental approach.

Under the new plan, the time had come for all students to be challenged instead of the district playing the low-expectations game. The change grew out of previous attempts and many of the participants in the detracking plan had been present at earlier attempts. As a matter of fact, one of the most renowned groups nationally to discuss the achievement gap—the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN)—was started by the previous LSCHS superintendent. He got similar districts with similar demographics to begin studying what some people had known to be true for years.

The critique that liberal groups are all talk with no action reflects the importance of seizing the right time for the right strategy. The former superintendent helped people understand and have awareness around the gap and helped begin a national conversation around the racial disparities in student achievement. But MSAN would soon be criticized for only being an organization that only talked and took no action. The change could not have been achieved without the courageous leadership of the previous superintendent and district administration.

The current conversations at LSCHS about race could not have come at a better time nationally, because as the decisions were being planned to move to a bolder strategy to improve achievement for students of color, there was the ascension of Barack Obama
onto the national stage and subsequently the White House. The country was beginning to think about having a Black president, and there was a great deal of national discourse around race and the social construction of it. The country was beginning to talk about race, and within the President’s first term, several events continued to aid in the discussion of race in America and in schools. One such event was the arrest of Dr. Louis Gates of Harvard University at his home after a neighbor mistook Gates for a man trying to break into Gates’ own house. When the arresting officers came into the house, I can imagine the paradox: the walls covered with pictures of Dr. Gates with Nelson Mandela, Muhammad Ali, and others, yet he was still arrested. The first Black president said the police acted “stupidly” arresting Dr. Gates. The outcome of this particular event was a “beer summit,” in which the President, Dr. Gates, Vice President Biden, and the arresting officer had a conversation about race.

As the national discourse around race was hitting a fever pitch, the LSCHS school district was engaged in a discussion around race and tracking. One would think the national conversation would provide a bit of political cover as liberals and others would debate the impact of race in the 21st century. The school district had already reached a conclusion that its practices were institutionally racist and something needed to change. It was clear the superintendent was leading the charge with the members of the school board and some of the staff.

There was a perfect storm of conversation, opportunity, and leadership taking place at this high school to make such a policy decision work. The previous superintendent laid the groundwork; No Child Left Behind required schools to focus on children of color who were falling behind; the country elected its first Black president;
and the superintendent was committed to moving forward. The community sentiment was mixed, yet the district leadership was on board about taking the district in a bold new direction.

Presence of Financial and Staff Resources

There are plenty of resources available to the students in this district, with annual spending being over $20,000 per student. Of the 265 faculty members, 78 percent are tenured and 21 percent non-tenured; the average teaching experience is 12 years; and over 80 percent have master’s degrees. The staff has the education and experience, and the district has the money, to figure this out. If one combines everything this district has going for it, at the end of the day, it still takes leadership to harness the talents and gifts of the faculty and provide vision and direction for what needs to happen to address the racial disparities in the data.

The sentiment communicated here is right on. It takes leadership to bring all of the necessary human capital and aspects of operating resources together. There are schools in large metropolitan areas with lower per-pupil expenditure and less-educated staffs that have better data on students of color, particularly Black students. There are principals and other leaders who would love to have the money and the talent this school has to address the problems they see in their schools. The point being, if the resources are there and the talent and experience are there, the only thing that is needed is leadership.

Conclusions

In implementing a plan to detrack freshman humanities, leaders at LSCHS personified qualities and conditions of leadership which they believed to be important in the adoption and implementation of the plan. The preponderance of their observations
stresses the importance of open discussions of race, explicitly citing the importance of confronting racism, admitting racism, and dealing with the denial of racism when it is an obstacle to change. Further, leaders described ethical or moral qualities such as commitment, passion, creative responses to obstacles, and egalitarianism which they thought had furthered the change process. Finally, they acknowledged the importance of external factors, from the national dialogue on race to the relative wealth of resources in their community.

Implications for Future Study

I have many commendations for the team at LSCHS and what they have accomplished so far, but I think about how they will continue to move forward with so many people opposed to the changes as they relate to race. Change within the context of race and racism in a White, middle- to upper-middle-class community is the challenge the leaders accepted. I wonder how the board and district leaders will protect the policy which was put in place at such cost. I wonder will there be more fallout at the next school board election, which is scheduled for the coming spring. Will current board members who voted for the changes also be voted out, or will the administration be asked to tone down some of the changes and stop talking about race? The policy is not immune to future attacks. The journey of racial consciousness is hard and non-linear, and the push back can be even harder. I know that since the board voted to detrack in December 2010, there was a board election in spring 2011 that was all about freshman restructuring. One member, who is now on the board, ran and spoke out against those changes.

It will also be interesting to know how effective these changes are in promoting race equity at LSCHS. Did the district elimination of tracking in freshman humanities
have an impact on closing the achievement gap? Or what is the most important measure in determining if this attempt to promote race equity through detracking was a success? The federal standards on a state exam aren’t the best way to ascertain if a student’s life has changed; how will the district handle that? How will it account for the changes it has made to the lives of students? I also wonder what additional changes will the district make to further advance and support the academic potential of its Black and Brown students?

This work makes me think about the fear of change and racial equity in this community and how the changes have impacted White parents, particularly those with gifted students, who were looking forward to challenging classes for their children and felt the new class would not be challenging enough. How are White parents who wanted their children in straight-honors classes feeling now? Throughout the study, there was no indication that the new course (freshman humanities) compromised rigor. As a matter of fact, many leaders cautioned on the other end of the argument, that the course might be too difficult. I would like to see some follow-up with parents who were opposed to the change and their subsequent feelings about the rigor and expectations their children experienced in the course.

I would like to see future studies of leadership for race equity and will be curious to see how many of the qualities attributed to successful leaders at LSCHS are attributed to leaders in parallel situations.

Though it is not covered in this study, one of the aspects of detracking about which I am curious is how teacher beliefs and racial attitudes affect the educational experience of students of color. At the classroom level, teachers must be the leaders for
race equity. I would imagine teachers would have a hard time confronting their own racism and beliefs about student achievement. Most teachers love to talk about teaching or working in urban and diverse settings, but have trouble discussing race and racism in schools; in this way they may mirror district leaders at the beginning of the process, when those leaders could not have progressed without serious discussions of race. Teachers are also having conversations about the intersection of race and pedagogy. I wonder how teachers are leading for equity at the classroom level; how lessons, curricula, and expectations are being defined—and redefined—by race.
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