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"We Are Not Your Colony": Policy Discourses and Resistance in Texas's Takeover of Houston Independent School District

Daniel I. Dawer
The University of Texas at Austin
United States

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Abstract: This paper applies principles of critical policy analysis (CPA) to examine the Texas Education Agency's (TEA) 2023 takeover of the Houston Independent School District (HISD). Engaging in qualitative analyses of four TEA-facilitated community information sessions held during the period immediately preceding the takeover, I examine the policy discourses officials invoked to frame the takeover and the counter-discourses community members used to disrupt the state's official narrative. Through policy discourses that attempted to narrow the scope, categorize community members, and create a sense of inevitability, state officials positioned the HISD community as passive recipients of the top-down implementation of takeover. In response, community members exercised their agency by strategically disrupting TEA's official takeover narrative and advancing counter-discourses that highlighted the state's organized neglect and evasion of answerability. Attending to gaps between the rhetoric and reality of takeover policy, this study demonstrates how the racialized narratives underpinning takeover, and state

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accountability systems more broadly, reinforce a disciplinary dynamic that neutralizes the democratic engagement of marginalized communities.
Keywords: community engagement; state takeover; policy discourse

"No somos su colonia": Discursos de política y resistencia en la toma de control del Distrito Escolar Independiente de Houston por parte de Texas

Resumen: Este artículo aplica los principios del análisis crítico de políticas (CPA) para examinar la toma de control del Distrito Escolar Independiente de Houston (HISD) por parte de la Agencia de Educación de Texas (TEA) en 2023. Al participar en análisis cualitativos de cuatro sesiones de información comunitaria facilitadas por la TEA celebradas durante el período inmediatamente anterior a la toma de control, examino los discursos de política que los funcionarios invocaron para enmarcar la toma de control y los contradiscursos que los miembros de la comunidad utilizaron para alterar la narrativa oficial del estado. A través de discursos de política que intentaron limitar el alcance, categorizar a los miembros de la comunidad y crear una sensación de inevitabilidad, los funcionarios estatales posicionaron a la comunidad del HISD como receptores pasivos de la implementación de la toma de control desde arriba hacia abajo. En respuesta, los miembros de la comunidad ejercieron su agencia al alterar estratégicamente la narrativa oficial de la toma de control de la TEA y al presentar contradiscursos que resaltaron la negligencia organizada y la evasión de responsabilidad del estado. Este estudio, que presta atención a las brechas entre la retórica y la realidad de las políticas de toma de poder, demuestra cómo las narrativas racializadas que sustentan las tomas de poder, y los sistemas de rendición de cuentas estatales en general, refuerzan una dinámica disciplinaria que neutraliza la participación democrática de las comunidades marginadas.
Palabras clave: participación comunitaria; toma de poder por parte del estado; discurso político

"Não somos sua colônia": Discursos políticos e resistência na aquisição do Distrito Escolar Independente de Houston pelo Texas

Resumo: Este artigo aplica princípios de análise crítica de políticas (CPA) para examinar a aquisição do Distrito Escolar Independente de Houston (HISD) pela Agência de Educação do Texas (TEA) em 2023. Envolvendo-me em análises qualitativas de quatro sessões de informação comunitária facilitadas pela TEA realizadas durante o período imediatamente anterior à aquisição, examino os discursos políticos que as autoridades invocaram para enquadrar a aquisição e os contradiscursos que os membros da comunidade usaram para interromper a narrativa oficial do estado. Por meio de discursos políticos que tentaram estreitar o escopo, categorizar os membros da comunidade e criar uma sensação de inevitabilidade, as autoridades estaduais posicionaram a comunidade do HISD como recipientes passivos da implementação de cima para baixo da aquisição. Em resposta, os membros da comunidade exerceram sua agência interrompendo estrategicamente a narrativa oficial de aquisição da TEA e avançando contradiscursos que destacaram a negligência organizada do estado e a evasão de responsabilidade. Atendendo às lacunas entre a retórica e a realidade da política de aquisição, este estudo demonstra como as narrativas racializadas que sustentam a aquisição, e os sistemas de responsabilização do estado de forma mais ampla, reforçam uma dinâmica disciplinar que neutraliza o engajamento democrático de comunidades marginalizadas.
Palavras-chave: engajamento da comunidade; aquisição pelo estado; discurso político

"We Are Not Your Colony": Policy Discourses and Resistance in Texas's Takeover of Houston Independent School District[1]

On March 15, 2023, Texas Commissioner of Education Mike Morath announced the Texas Education Agency (TEA) would proceed with a takeover of the Houston Independent School District (HISD). A provision in the Texas Education Code authorized Morath to appoint a board of managers and superintendent after just one of HISD's 274 campuses, Wheatley High School, received multiple consecutive unacceptable performance ratings under the state's A-F accountability system. In the months between Morath's announcement and the takeover's effective start on June 1st, 2023, TEA orchestrated a process to transition the district to state control that included the dissemination of state policy documents, media appearances, and a series of community information sessions to notify the public of TEA's process for dismantling the district's elected school board and appointing a board of managers.

During these information sessions, TEA officials encountered significant resistance from HISD community members. Media reports described how events "quickly got out of hand" as attendees "erupted in shouts" and "took over" the meetings to voice their concerns with the takeover (Bennett et al., 2023; Burns, 2023; B. Lopez, 2023). Despite Commissioner Morath's expressed desire that TEA, HISD, and community members "work together in a cooperative and productive manner for the best interest of Houston ISD students during the current period of transition" (Morath, 2023, p. 6), the contentious nature of the meetings signaled conflict between official and community perspectives and raised doubts about how smoothly the district's transition to state control would proceed.

This paper analyzes the policy discourses TEA officials invoked to justify the state takeover of Houston ISD during four board of managers community information sessions held during a critical transition period in March 2023. Simultaneously, it investigates how members of the HISD community challenged the state's official takeover narrative through strategic acts of disruption. Through qualitative analyses of four TEA-facilitated community information sessions, this study seeks to answer two research questions:

1. What policy discourses did TEA officials use to justify the takeover of HISD, and how were these discourses embedded in the board of managers community information sessions?
2. What counter-discourses did HISD community members use to respond to the state's official takeover narrative?

Analyses of the community information sessions revealed two sets of findings. First, TEA attempted to narrow the scope of the sessions to depoliticize the takeover and sanitize public participation. By structuring meetings to prioritize the one-way provision of information about the process for selecting the district's appointed board of managers, categorizing the state's desired applicants for the board of managers applicants as distinct from speakers who criticized the takeover, and framing the takeover as the inevitable result of chronic and systemic academic failure, TEA officials attempted to position the HISD community as passive recipients of the top-down implementation of takeover. Second, community members responded by taking control of the information sessions to highlight the state's organized neglect of district schools and the broader

[1] The author would like to thank Sarah Woulfin and Miriam Ezzani for their assistance in developing earlier versions of this manuscript, as well as the editors and reviewers who provided comments and suggestions throughout the revision process.

Houston community. Situating the takeover amid a history of state-produced crises—including chronic underfunding for public education, the legacy of systemic racism, and the COVID-19 pandemic—speakers reframed the state's takeover approach as an evasion of answerability and an attack on the democratic rights of Black and Latino/a Houstonians. The conflict that emerged between state officials and HISD community members ultimately produced a disciplinary dynamic that leaders drew on to reframe the democratic engagement of marginalized communities as a threat to the smooth implementation of education policy.

Literature Review: Policy Discourses of State Takeover

State takeovers of local school districts first gained prominence in the 1980s as part of a decades-long project by state leaders to centralize authority over public education and expand state accountability systems (Fusarelli & Cooper, 2009; McDermott, 2011; Wong & Shen, 2003). Using arguments of economic competitiveness, a group of self-proclaimed "education governors" pressed state legislatures to enact takeover laws allowing them to intervene in districts deemed underperforming by rising academic standards (Henig, 2009). Since Arkansas enacted the first takeover law in 1983, over thirty states followed suit, and more than twenty have taken over at least one district (Morel, 2018; Schueler & Bleiberg, 2022). In recent decades, state leaders have relied increasingly on takeovers to manage the problem of persistent academic underperformance, particularly in communities that have experienced historical patterns of disinvestment and racial and economic segregation (Welsh & Williams, 2018).

Though proponents typically argue that increased attention from state authorities will improve academic outcomes, empirical studies of takeover suggest otherwise. In most cases, takeovers failed to increase student achievement, and in some instances were associated with declines in performance (Hayes et al., 2023; Schueler, 2024; Schueler & Bleiberg, 2022; Welsh, 2019). However, takeovers typically trigger significant policy changes in targeted districts, including more frequent school closures and charter expansion (Buras, 2011; Welsh, 2019), the displacement of culturally relevant pedagogies by hyperaccountability regimes (Royal & Gibson, 2017; Welsh & Williams, 2018), and the emergence of equity concerns related to school discipline and special education (Nelson, 2017; Welsh, 2019). Researchers also frequently note the racialized dimensions of takeovers. The majority of takeovers have targeted urban school districts with large concentrations of low-income students of color (Morel, 2018; Oluwole & Green, 2009). This trend suggests that race plays a role when states decide which districts to take over, with majority-Black districts facing higher risks of intervention than similarly-performing districts with larger proportions of White students (Arsen et al., 2016; Morel, 2018; Schueler & Bleiberg, 2022). While state officials typically explain away this troubling pattern by suggesting that accountability systems compel them to act in cases of persistent academic underperformance, these explanations often elide the degree of discretion involved in decisions to carry out takeover—let alone how these decisions are communicated and justified to affected communities.

When attempting to justify takeovers of predominantly Black and Latino/a school districts, state leaders often invoke policy discourses rooted in color-evasiveness and racism. For instance, state leaders in Michigan packaged the takeover of the Detroit Public Schools in color-evasive language that justified targeting majority-Black districts for intervention while sparing Whiter districts that met identical criteria (Wright et al., 2020). Similarly, leaders in Georgia used racist narratives to shape the policy discourse surrounding the campaign to establish the Opportunity School District (OSD), the state's proposed turnaround district. Portraying students of color as deficient, inept, and criminally inclined, OSD advocates used coded and explicitly racist language to

elicit the support of prejudiced constituents while downplaying their own racism (Welsh, Williams et al., 2019). Additionally, Lovell (2022) analyzed the racialized narrative frames invoked by Texas government officials in their initial 2019 attempt to take over Houston ISD, revealing how state leaders attempted to justify state intervention in the district by villainizing local leaders of color while casting themselves as saviors. Through these discourses, state leaders framed takeover as a moral imperative to rescue low-income Black and Latino/a children from what they portrayed as the irresponsible stewardship of their own families and communities (Morel, 2018).

Takeovers also carry racialized political implications for the communities they target. Many takeovers result in the dismantling of local school boards and their replacement with state-appointed boards of managers, receivers, or oversight panels—an outcome eight times more likely to occur in majority-Black districts than in majority-white districts (Morel, 2018; Schueler & Bleiberg, 2022). Because these managers answer only to the state officials who appoint them, takeovers disenfranchise communities by removing their power to elect their own leaders and hold them accountable. For Black and Latino/a communities that have relied on school board elections to secure democratic representation and mobilize around education issues, takeovers can constrain their influence over district decisions and reduce long-term community engagement in school and local politics (Dixson et al., 2015; Morel, 2018; Morel & Nuamah, 2020). As a result, some scholars argue that by employing racially exclusionary mechanisms and denying communities of color the right to self-governance, state takeovers reinforce a broader agenda of Black dispossession that appropriates urban communities for private extraction and exploitation (Buras, 2011; Cassidy & Nelson, 2022; Lipman, 2013).

Historical and Policy Context: Houston ISD

Houston ISD is the largest school district in Texas and the eighth largest in the United States (US), enrolling just under 200,000 children across 274 campuses. Like many districts targeted for takeover, HISD serves greater concentrations of Black and Latino/a[2] students compared to their representation across the state: in 2023, 62% of HISD students were Latino/a and 22% were Black, compared to 55% and 13% statewide, respectively. Nearly 80% of HISD students were classified as economically disadvantaged, compared to 61% of all students enrolled in Texas public schools (Houston ISD, 2023; O'Hara et al., 2022).

These enrollment patterns did not occur by accident; rather, they resulted from policy that intensified patterns of racial and economic segregation both within HISD and across surrounding districts. In this section, I examine the historical roots of TEA's takeover of the district by tracing the legacy of racial segregation in HISD from the 1950s to the present. This historical context helps explain how Texas shifted from compliance with court-mandated desegregation to an accountability agenda, setting the stage for takeover.

A Shift from Desegregation to Accountability

When the Supreme Court declared racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), HISD was operating the largest segregated school system in the country (Kellar, 1999). For decades preceding the Court's decision, White district leaders had sought to make "separate but equal" a reality in HISD by dedicating substantial resources to the

[2] Throughout this paper, I use "Latino/a" to refer to people of Hispanic or Latinx ethnicity. This is the term that community members used to describe themselves when speaking during the community information sessions.

construction of racially segregated facilities for Black children. One of these schools, Wheatley High School, was rebuilt in 1949 at a price of $2.5 million, making it the most expensive public school building in HISD at the time (Bradley, 2020).

Like other school systems across the South, HISD employed a range of tactics to circumvent and delay desegregation orders in the decades after *Brown*. These tactics included a 1965 "stair-step" plan to integrate the district one grade at a time over a 12-year period as well as a 1970 scheme to bus Mexican American children, who were classified as White, to Black schools in an attempt to maintain segregated schools for White children (San Miguel, 2001). Residents on Houston's west side even attempted to secede from HISD and establish the Westheimer Independent School District—which, if efforts had succeeded, would have enrolled a nearly 90% White student body (Kellar, 1999). HISD eventually implemented a Voluntary Interdistrict Education Plan in conjunction with a districtwide magnet school desegregation program, and in 1981, a district judge ruled that HISD had achieved unitary status. After the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld this decision, federal pressure on HISD to desegregate effectively ended (*Ross v. Houston Independent School Dist, 699 F.2d 218*, 1983).

In the decades following the Circuit Court's ruling, desegregation efforts in HISD were gradually undone as patterns of suburban White flight, residential segregation, and the uneven distribution of magnet school programs across the district attenuated the exposure of HISD's Black and Latino/a students to their White peers (Kroger, 1999). Consequently, racially and economically isolated school populations emerged in pockets of the district, particularly at campuses that did not house magnet programs. For instance, at Wheatley High School—where a magnet program was proposed, but never implemented—Black students began leaving in the 1970s to attend magnet programs located on other campuses. This outmigration was never offset by an equivalent influx of students into the school, and as a result, Wheatley's enrollment dwindled and its racial and economic isolation intensified (Berryhill, 1997). By 2020, Wheatley's student body was 98.9% Black or Latino/a, with 96% classified as economically disadvantaged and 19.5% receiving special education services (The Texas Tribune, 2020). Districtwide, HISD's Black and Latino/a students continue to rank among the most racially isolated in the country (Orfield & Jarvie, 2020).

As Texas phased out school desegregation efforts through the 1980s and 1990s, the state embraced an accountability agenda of administering statewide assessments and assigning performance ratings to districts and campuses based on student test scores, which in turn were invoked to justify punitive sanctions and interventions (Daniel, 2004). Mirroring a shift that occurred across the southern states (Baker, 2015), Texas leaders began to deemphasize school desegregation as a vehicle for achieving equal educational opportunity, instead promoting testing and accountability systems as means for achieving educational excellence. This shift was enacted in statue with the Texas Legislature's 1984 approval of HB 72, which established a statewide testing and accountability system, and accelerated in 1986 when legislators tied students' ability to earn a high school diploma to their passage of minimum competency tests (Lutz, 1986). As state leaders increased the quantity and rigor of these assessments across subsequent decades—spurred in part by federal testing requirements under No Child Left Behind (NCLB)—TEA gradually centralized its authority over local school districts while institutionalizing the practice of assigning stigmatizing labels to schools that failed to meet state performance benchmarks (Maxcy et al., 2009). As a result, Texas's most racially and economically isolated schools and districts have disproportionately been deemed underperforming and targeted for punitive actions like takeover (Vasquez Heilig & Holme, 2013).

Amid Texas's shift from desegregation to accountability, state leaders added a 1984 "academic bankruptcy" provision to the state's education code authorizing the TEA Commissioner to appoint "a master to oversee the operations of [a] district" if it failed to satisfy accreditation

standards (Bowers, 1989; HB 72, 1984). Though TEA exercised its takeover authority in only a limited number of cases in the 1990s (Ziebarth, 2002), mounting pressure from federal accountability reforms encouraged leaders to take increasingly aggressive action to improve academic achievement. Specifically, NCLB identified takeover as one of four mandatory restructuring reforms for schools that experienced four consecutive years of academic underperformance (McDermott, 2011), and though the 2015 passage of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) devolved significant authority over the design and implementation of accountability systems back to the states (Egalite et al., 2017), the law still required state leaders to implement "more rigorous interventions" to turn around their lowest-performing schools (Black et al., 2020).

A Policy Timeline of TEA's Takeover of HISD

In this section, I trace the chronology of state and district events from 2015 to 2023 that led up to the takeover. Figure 1 presents a timeline of relevant policy events that unfolded as the state attempted to assume control of the district.

In 2015, the Texas Legislature expanded TEA's authority to intervene in underperforming districts with the passage of HB 1842. The bill granted the TEA Commissioner authority to appoint a board of managers to any school district with a single campus that received five consecutive unacceptable performance ratings (HB 1842, 2015). HB 1842 also designated 2014 as the first year state accountability ratings would count as consecutive.

By 2017, HISD's Wheatley High School had received unacceptable ratings for four consecutive years, making it one substandard rating away from triggering a takeover of the district. However, disruptions caused by Hurricane Harvey in August 2017 prompted TEA to assign the campus a label of *Not Rated: Harvey Provision* for 2018, granting the district a one-year reprieve from accountability sanctions (TEA, 2018). TEA clarified that for districts and campuses that received a *Not Rated* label for 2018, ratings in 2017 and 2019 would be considered consecutive.

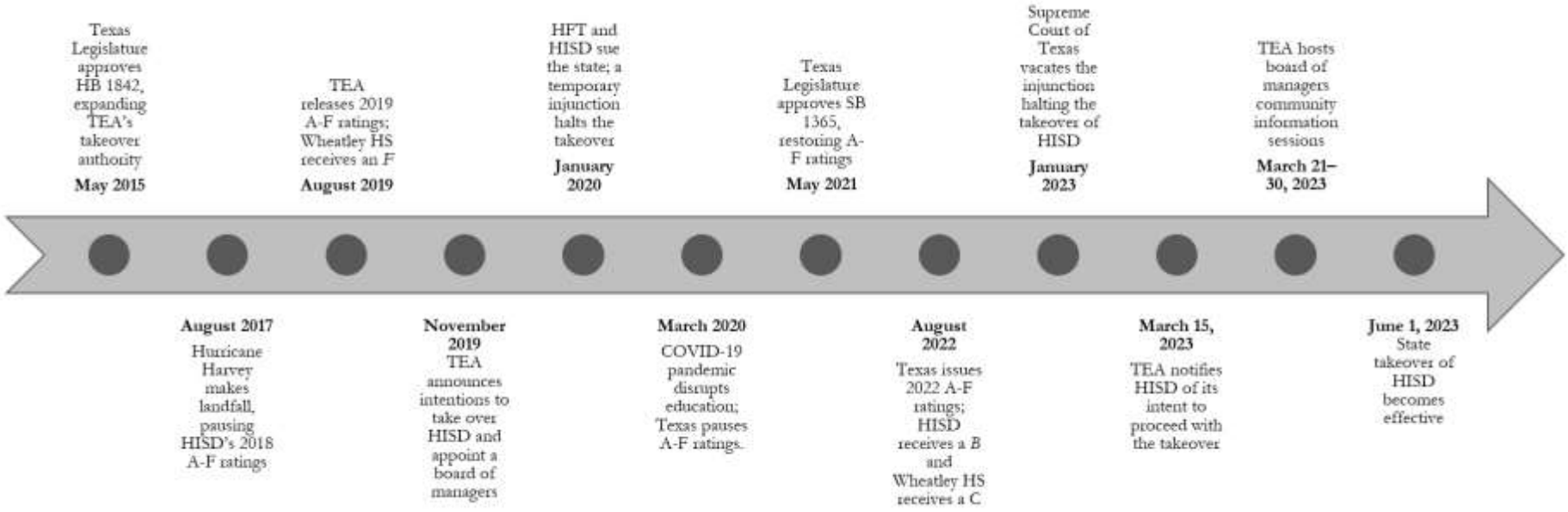
In 2019, HISD earned an overall *B* rating from TEA, but Wheatley received an *F*—placing the district squarely in the crosshairs for takeover. In response, HISD's board of trustees voted to appeal Wheatley's failing grade, pointing out that if just two more of the school's class of 2018 graduates had met the state's College, Career, and Military Readiness requirements, Wheatley would have achieved an acceptable rating (Carpenter, 2019a). TEA denied the district's appeal, however, arguing that to modify the criteria used to determine Wheatley's rating would compromise the integrity of the state's accountability system (Morath, 2019a)

On November 15, 2019, TEA first announced its intention to take over HISD, a process that would involve dismantling the district's elected board and appointing a board of managers and superintendent. In a letter addressed to district leaders, Commissioner Morath provided a timeline of Wheatley's accountability ratings to demonstrate what he termed "the long-standing failure of the board of trustees to provide better educational opportunities to the students of this campus," and to argue that state intervention was necessary to protect the best interests of the district's children (Morath, 2019b, p. 5).

In response, the Houston Federation of Teachers joined a lawsuit filed by HISD trustees challenging the constitutionality of the takeover (Carpenter, 2019b). Plaintiffs contended that the takeover violated the federal Voting Rights Act and Texas's Equal Rights Amendment, as the planned dismantling of the elected board would disenfranchise the district's Black and Latino/a voters (Johnson, 2019). In January 2020, district judge Catherine Mauzy issued a temporary injunction prohibiting TEA from taking additional actions to appoint a board of managers or imposing sanctions on the district (Mauzy, 2020).

Figure 1

Policy Timeline of TEA's Takeover of Houston ISD, 2015-2023



TEA promised to appeal the ruling and criticized the district's resistance to the takeover:

> Any time you are taking on a powerful and entrenched bureaucracy, the road to meaningful change is long and arduous, but when the futures of our children are at stake, we will stop at nothing to make sure they are properly provided for. (TEA, as cited in Swaby, 2020)

Houston ISD v. TEA and Commissioner Morath was not heard in court for more than two years, however, due to the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Houston was hit particularly hard by COVID-19, with the city's Black and Latino communities experiencing disproportionate rates of infection, death, and economic hardship (Xu et al., 2022). The pandemic adversely affected HISD students' academic achievement, health, and well-being (Understanding Houston, 2021), creating significant challenges for the district at the same time that it contended with growing teacher shortages (B. Lopez, 2021).

Early in the pandemic, Texas Governor Greg Abbot waived testing requirements for the 2019-20 academic year, effectively pausing the state's accountability system. When the Texas Legislature convened in 2021, lawmakers approved SB 1365, which reinstated the assignment of state accountability ratings and granted the Commissioner authority to temporarily label districts and campuses as *Not Rated* in lieu of receiving a *D* or *F* rating for 2022. SB 1365 specified that the Commissioner's accountability determinations were "final and unappealable," and clarified that a *Not Rated* label "is not considered a break in consecutive school years of unacceptable performance ratings" (SB 1365, 2021). Despite assurances from Representative Dan Huberty, one of the bill's sponsors, on the floor of the Texas House that SB 1365 "does not impact any current lawsuits that are going on, specifically in accountability issues . . . it doesn't impact anything specifically related to Houston ISD . . . it does not expand the power or authority of the Commissioner of Education" (Texas House of Representatives Video Player, 2021, 3:59:03), the bill was specifically tailored to provide TEA a means for overcoming the court's injunction blocking the takeover.

In August 2022, TEA released school accountability ratings for the first time since 2019. HISD received a *B* and Wheatley received a *C*, resulting in the removal of the campus from Improvement Required status. Despite Wheatley's improvement, the state continued to push for a takeover. In October 2022, *Houston ISD v. TEA and Commissioner Morath* was heard in the Supreme Court of Texas. In a January 2023 ruling, Justice Jane Bland reversed the lower court's judgment and vacated the injunction halting the takeover. Noting that during the period between the lower court's ruling and her own, the Texas Legislature had "abrogated much of the court of appeal's interpretation of the Education Code provisions that govern this case" (Bland, 2023, p. 14), Justice Bland retroactively applied provisions of SB 1365, granting TEA authority to proceed.

On March 15, 2023, Commissioner Morath officially notified HISD of TEA's intent to take over the district. In an enforcement letter to district leaders, Morath argued that despite any improvements that had occurred in the district, TEA maintained an obligation to intervene:

> prior academic performance issues continue to require action under state law. Even with a delay of three full years caused by legal proceedings, systemic problems in Houston ISD continue to impact students most in need of our collective support . . . Wheatley's acceptable rating this year does not abrogate my prior legal requirement to intervene based on the seven consecutive unacceptable ratings that were addressed by the original Board of Managers order. (Morath, 2023, p. 3)

Along with Wheatley's consecutive unacceptable ratings, Morath cited the multi-year appointment of a state conservator to the district as further justification for the takeover. HB 1842 specifies that the Commissioner may appoint a board of managers if a conservator is assigned to a district for more than two consecutive school years (HB 1842, 2015). Dr. Doris Delaney, who was originally appointed to oversee instruction at HISD's Kashmere High School in 2016, saw her conservator role expanded in 2017 and again in 2019 to include oversight of the board and turnaround efforts at all the district's underperforming campuses. Morath also highlighted inappropriate actions by former HISD trustees, including potential violations of the Texas Open Meetings Act, as well as the district's struggles to meet state and federal special education obligations, to characterize HISD's governance and compliance problems as systemic.

Days after Morath's announcement, TEA announced plans to host a series of public meetings to provide information to the HISD community about the process for selecting a board of managers for the district. These meetings occurred in four locations across Houston: Westbury High School in the southwest, Chavez High School in the southeast's Meadowbrook/Allendale neighborhood, Delmar Fieldhouse in the northwest, and Kashmere High School in the northeast's Trinity/Houston Gardens neighborhood. Community members were invited to attend these

meetings to "learn more and ask questions about the process" (HISD Communications, 2023). It is these informational meetings and the policy discourses and counter-discourses that emerged within them that I focus on in this paper.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Policy Analysis

To answer questions about the policy discourses that emerged during early phases of takeover and their connection to larger power dynamics shaping takeover implementation, I drew on critical policy analysis (CPA). CPA represents a theoretical framework that education policy researchers can use to analyze how the unequal distribution of power shapes the contexts in which policy is designed, implemented, and experienced. Because state takeovers run counter to democratic principles of local educational governance, they rarely proceed without generating public controversy; more often, they trigger political turmoil and resistance from affected communities (Fried, 2020; Morel, 2018; Schueler, 2019). Thus, it is important for researchers who study takeovers to attend critically to the power dynamics that structure its enactment and examine how local communities respond to its implementation.

CPA rejects traditional, positivist paradigms that treat policymaking as a deliberate or predictable process. Instead, it embraces complexity by examining the historical roots, rhetorical frames, and institutional structures that surround policy and legitimize certain voices while marginalizing others. Young and Diem (2017) outline five principles central to CPA-oriented studies. First, CPA interrogates the discontinuities between policy rhetoric and reality. This process involves attending to both official government policies as well as the "many little-p policies" carried out within institutional settings (Ball, 2008, p. 7), noting how actors situated at different positions of the sociopolitical power structure understand and experience policy. It also entails analyzing instances in which the officially stated goals and purposes of policies diverge from the lived experiences of affected communities.

Second, CPA scrutinizes the mechanisms structuring the formulation and evolution of policy. Critical policy analysts recognize that the classical stage model of the policymaking process fails to explain the "complex combination of factors" that shape the environments in which policy ideas are introduced, debated, and acted upon (Kingdon, 2014, p. 76). Instead, CPA scholars examine how policy "is produced, resisted, and reshaped in many different sites other than legislatures" and through interactions among various policy actors (Horsford et al., 2019, p. 33). Applying this widened frame, researchers can gain more comprehensive understandings of the institutional settings, procedures, and mechanisms that structure actors' meaning making about policy and shape their engagement in policy processes.

Third, CPA investigates power dynamics and how policy responds to, reinforces, or transforms the distribution of power. By attending to the micropolitics of the policy process and "the various ways people's interests are shaped ideologically" (Horsford et al., 2019, p. 33), CPA allows researchers to examine how power is socially constructed and cognitively experienced.

Fourth, CPA examines how policy reproduces social stratification and inequality. By situating analysis of policies within the sociopolitical and historical contexts in which they emerge, critical policy analysts uncover the ways that dominant ideologies such as racism, White supremacy, and neoliberalism structure the policy process and shape people's assumptions about policy issues (Gillborn, 2014). CPA helps attune researchers to the explicit and subtle ways these ideologies become manifested in policy actors' discourses and actions.

Fifth, CPA sheds light on how marginalized groups resist or engage with policy. By examining how policies are "received, reinterpreted, and even resisted . . . by local actors and

communities" (Apple, 2019, p. 281), critical policy analysts trace the ways policies are reshaped and recontextualized during the implementation process. Additionally, by highlighting the experiences of people historically marginalized by education policy, CPA researchers can support the empowerment and emancipation of groups working to resist their own domination and oppression (Diem et al., 2014).

CPA emphasizes that policies do not possess singular, stable, or objective meanings; instead, their meanings evolve as they are constituted through social processes. Consequently, Fischer (2003) calls on critical policy scholars to examine *policy discourses*, or the ways that "political action is constituted by discourses, from hegemonic discourses embedded in the existing institutions . . . to the oppositional efforts of other groups attempting to create new discourses" (p. 45). Discourse analysis leans on the notion that all actions and utterances contribute to the construction of a complex network of social identities, relationships, and systems, which in turn serve to reproduce or transform social structures (Fairclough, 1992). As such, discourse does more than shape people's perceptions: it actively constructs their realities. In sum, critically analysis of policy discourses means examining how discursive practices acquire social significance within institutional contexts (Fischer, 2003), a process that involves disentangling the conflicting narrative frames policy actors and groups use to advance different interpretations of policy and examining how dominant and counter-discourses vie for authority in the policy process.

CPA holds much potential for studying takeover, as the takeover implementation process typically engenders conflict between actors across implementation levels. Indeed, researchers have applied elements of CPA to examine competing argumentative frames in media representations of the state takeover of the Little Rock School District (T. A. Lopez et al., 2023) and the racialized implementation of emergency management takeover policy in Michigan (Wright et al., 2020). These studies used CPA to reveal the unequal power relations structuring the framing and implementation of takeover policy, highlighting how these power dynamics perpetuated racist systems in which education policies like takeover are embedded.

Methods

To understand the discourses invoked by TEA officials and the counter-discourses advanced by HISD community members about the takeover, I analyzed video recordings of four TEA-facilitated board of managers community meetings held between March 21 and March 30, 2023, using the first two components of Erickson's (2006) three-type approach for deriving data from video records. Researchers have used Erickson's video analysis method to examine the racialization of school board meeting rules (Sampson & Bertrand, 2022) and the discursive strategies of resistance employed by speakers during school board public comment periods (Sampson & Bertrand, 2023) Thus, the approach represents an effective method for investigating how TEA's policy discourses became embedded in the structure of the board of managers community meetings and how members of the HISD community contested the takeover's official framing.

Data Sources

To enable answering my research questions about discourses in takeover, I first obtained videos of the four community information sessions. Specifically, KHOU 11, Houston's CBS affiliate, and FOX 26 Houston recorded and live-streamed separate videos of each meeting, all of which were posted publicly online. Each meeting lasted approximately one hour, with the third extending an additional twenty minutes to accommodate audience participation. Cameras were positioned near the back or the side of each venue, capturing the official presenters, TEA's

presentations, and portions of the audience. Most audience members' facial expressions were not visible, however, as participants typically faced away from the camera. Additionally, audio quality issues complicated the transcription process. Because officials only provided attendees access to a microphone during the third and fourth information sessions, participants were forced to speak without amplification or with a megaphone during the first two meetings. As a result, transcripts included a small number of gaps in which audience comments were inaudible or unclear. In these instances, I compared the two recordings of the community information sessions and scrutinized the moments immediately before and after these gaps to hypothesize about the content of speakers' comments.

Because speakers were not required to provide any identifying information, it was not possible to ascertain any patterns related to speakers' racial, gender, or other social identities. However, numerous speakers introduced themselves by voluntarily highlighting their own marginalized racial identities, intentionally positioning themselves as representatives of Houston's communities of color. For instance, during the second community information session, one speaker, who provided comments in Spanish, stated: "yo represento las voces de las madres, do los padres que hablan español. Y quiero decirte que sesenta y dos porciento . . . en HISD son Latinos[3]" (KHOU 11, 2023b, 17:29). Another speaker, who introduced themselves as a "Black voter," referenced the song "They Don't Care About Us" as they intoned, "Distrust us, hate us, y'all don't really love us. Y'all don't really care about us. Black voters matter. Brown voters matter" (KHOU 11, 2023b, 41:04). By explicitly identifying themselves as Black or Latino/a, these and other speakers presented themselves as spokespeople for Houston's predominantly Black and Latino/a communities, a positioning they contrasted with the disproportionately White state leadership overseeing the takeover.

Data Analysis

Consistent with CPA's focus on the gaps between policy rhetoric and reality and its emphasis on the mechanisms through which policy discourses achieve meaning within particular institutional contexts, I critically analyzed the policy discourses that emerged across these information sessions using inductive and deductive methods (F. Erickson, 2006). Erickson suggests that researchers employ a "critical, reflective phenomenology of video watching" that strategically focuses attention on certain elements of social interactions in video recordings across multiple viewings (p. 179). Erickson's first type of video analysis is an inductive approach that involves: 1) viewing a recorded event in its entirety while writing observation notes; 2) watching the recording a second time while pausing to mark important section boundaries; 3) reviewing specific episodes of interest within the recording while noting key verbal and nonverbal interactions; and 4) determining whether specific segments are representative of overall patterns of interaction throughout the recording. Erickson's second type of video analysis is a deductive approach that involves: 1) identifying specific types of interactions or events across a video recording, and 2) tabulating the occurrences of these interactions, focusing on what speakers do and say in these moments. Though not employed in this study, Erickson's third type of analysis is designed for studies of teachers' pedagogy and focuses on the ways subject matter content becomes manifest during instruction.

First, through inductive analysis of each information session, I identified section boundaries that signaled shifts among participants and traced the chains of events precipitating these shifts. I used inductive codes to mark instances in which rules for participants were established ("rules"), speakers were interrupted ("interruptions"), shifts in speaker authority occurred ("shifts in

[3] "I represent the voices of the mothers, of the fathers who speak Spanish. And I want to tell you that sixty-two percent . . . in HISD are Latinos."

authority"), as well as to label other themes that emerged in the data. Next, I engaged in deductive coding for evidence regarding power, race, and democracy, as these concepts were grounded in the literature on takeovers and CPA. Deductive codes were grounded in the literature on grassroots actors' perceptions of takeover, which emphasizes their tendency to perceive takeover as a threat to educators' professional autonomy and as a threat to the political empowerment of communities of color (Morel, 2018; Welsh, Graham et al., 2019). Specifically, I sought to identify instances in which officials' and community members' claims to power and authority were challenged, renegotiated, or redefined; moments when the racial identities of speakers or state officials were mentioned, emphasized, or evaded; and instances in which takeover implementation was characterized as democratic or undemocratic (see Table 1 for these sections of the codebook).

Table 1

Codebook Sections on Power, Race, and Democracy

Codes	**Definition**	**Examples**
Race	Parent code	
Centering race	Highlighting race and racial identity	Identifying one's or another's racial identity, discussing the district's racial diversity, contrasting the racial identities of community members with those of state leaders
Race evasiveness	Avoiding mention of race and racial identity	Redirecting conversations about race to other topics, discussing the takeover in race-neutral terms, appealing to state laws and accountability systems without discussing race
Links to racism	Connecting the takeover to racist structures and systems	Characterizing the takeover as hostile or anti-Black, linking it to a historical legacy of racism
Power	Parent code	
Establishing rules	Setting official norms for audience participation	Requiring submitted questions to pertain to the board of managers selection process, directing speakers to hold their questions until after the presentation
Challenging authority	Questioning the legitimacy and/or credibility of the officials facilitating the sessions and their superiors	Disrupting official presentations, dismissing the content of the provided presentations, demanding to speak with a higher authority
Taking control	Wresting control over the structure of the information sessions away from official presenters	Audience members calling for the microphone, using a megaphone to speak over presenters, leading a walkout, enforcing their own time limits for speakers
Democracy	Parent code	
Promoting democratic equality	Ensuring all participants share authority and can access power	Asserting the right to ask questions, sharing a megaphone, calling for bottom-up accountability
Justifying undemocratic structures	Defending the curtailment of the public's voice and power	Justifying the elimination of voting rights, prioritizing efficient district performance over democratic input

Given people's tendency to speak about race in evasive or indirect terms, I traced racial meanings across the information sessions by locating moments when speakers explicitly addressed topics of race and/or racism as well moments when officials responded to these concerns by redirecting the conversation through race-evasive appeals to state law and accountability policy. My analysis of power and democracy focused on the negotiation of authority and control over the meeting structure, content, and rules for audience participation. Specifically, I attended to instances in which officials sought to establish or enforce expectations and structure the content of their presentations to convey messages about the purpose of the sessions, positioning themselves as presenters and audience members as receivers. I also highlighted moments in which speakers contested officials' planned structures for the meetings, challenged their authority, and characterized both the information sessions and the takeover itself as undemocratic.

In both phases of analysis, I wrote analytic and reflective memos to identify recurring themes and connections to CPA principles (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For instance, I memoed on the physical layout of the spaces in which the information sessions were held, how officials and community members framed or evaded issues of race and racism, and speakers' strategies for disrupting official participation rules and establishing and enforcing their own. After transcribing video recordings of the meetings, I systematically coded transcripts and constructed categories for speakers' statements (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Using the constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), I consolidated categories of codes to identify three policy discourses invoked by state officials and two counter-discourses used by community members. These analytic techniques enabled me to trace the discourses that emerged across the community information sessions and contrast who advanced which ideas and narratives.

Positionality

CPA's attention to issues of power, inequality, and systems of oppression compels me to examine my own involvement and potential complicity in these systems (Turner et al., 2024). I am a White, English-speaking, cisgender male researcher who previously worked as a teacher in racially and economically diverse Texas public schools. During this period, my experiences collaborating and standing in solidarity with grassroots Black and Latino/a-led community organizations and activists led me to question the official narratives invoked by state leaders to justify Texas's punitive academic accountability system—particularly, its tendency to normalize White supremacy and reproduce racial inequality (De Lissovoy & McLaren, 2003). These experiences also expanded my understanding of how racism, White supremacy, and other oppressive structures granted me various forms of unearned privilege as a White male teacher even as they marginalized the students and families I served.

This recognition has compelled me to pursue a research agenda grounded in principles of racial equity, reflexivity, and collaboration with marginalized communities. This paper thus emerged as part of a multi-year community-based study of the takeover of HISD, as an attempt to answer research questions generated in collaboration with grassroots Houston organizations and local teachers, students, families, and community members. In the process, I have attempted to redirect the institutional privilege afforded to me as a researcher toward disrupting the racialized discourses of deficit structuring the takeover's implementation. Specifically, this process has involved seeking out and learning from the "theories, perspectives, views, positions, and discourses that emerge from the experiences and points of view of people and researchers of color" (Milner, 2007, p. 390). Informed by a community of color epistemological approach (Matias & Liou, 2014), this scholarship aims to elevate the racialized counter-narratives advanced by Black and Latino/a Houstonians and interpret the takeover in the context of people's lived experiences of systemic racism and White supremacy.

Findings

During the community information sessions, TEA officials and community members used conflicting discursive frames to portray the takeover of HISD. Seeking to detach the takeover from its sociopolitical context, state officials attempted to narrow the focus of the meetings to governance issues by tailoring their presentation to a preferred audience: potential applicants for HISD's appointed board of managers. State officials also cast the takeover as the inevitable result of chronic academic failure, deflecting community protests in the process. In contrast, speakers disrupted the state's official narrative by linking the takeover to a pattern of state policies that demonstrated neglect for the HISD community. Speakers called on state leaders to answer to the community and framed the takeover as a racialized attack on their democratic rights.

These diverging policy discourses demonstrated several principles of CPA. First, the discursive strategies state officials used to justify the takeover denied the lived realities of the HISD community, reflecting the first principle of CPA (discontinuities between policy rhetoric and reality reveal elements of the power structure shaping policy implementation). Where leaders saw a narrow, apolitical intervention into the district's governance structure, community members perceived an intensification of state neglect and disenfranchisement. Second, as community members disrupted the state's planned structures for the meetings, mechanisms for implementing the takeover shifted in response, reflecting the second and fifth principles of CPA (policy is resisted and reshaped through complex interactions among policy actors; marginalized groups can shift the meaning of policy through their engagement and resistance). Meetings originally designed for the one-way dissemination of state-selected information transformed into chaotic town halls in which officials appeared unprepared or unwilling to engage meaningfully with community concerns.

Third, the conflicts that unfolded across the meetings revealed crucial aspects of the power dynamics shaping the takeover, exhibiting the third and fourth principles of CPA (the policy process is shaped by the unequal distribution of power; attention to context reveals how policy reproduces inequality). State leaders, particularly the governor and the state commissioner of education, faced criticism for their conspicuous absence from all four community information sessions even as they engaged in advocacy about education policy issues in more welcoming venues at the same time. As a result, the takeover emerged as a top-down imposition of state power on Houston's Black and Latino/a communities.

The State's Official Takeover Narrative

Policy narratives "position social actors and institutional practices" in ways that "stress some aspects of an event and conceal or downplay others" (Fischer, 2003, pp. 87-88). When backed by the institutional authority of the state, official narratives of takeover deploy strategic policy discourses to position various actors, including state and district leaders, teachers, students, and community members, in ways that aim to justify undemocratic and often disruptive forms of state intervention.

Invoking three types of policy discourses across the community information sessions held in 2023 between March 21 and March 30 (see Table 2), TEA officials constructed a narrative of takeover that framed it as a top-down intervention in a community expected to remain passive as it acquiesced to the state's reform agenda. First, officials attempted to use a discourse of *narrowing the scope* to restrict the purview of the meetings to the process of transitioning the district to a state-appointed board of managers; however, this approach was not entirely effective in sidelining community members' concerns. Officials also employed a discourse of *role categorization* to enforce a division in the HISD community between potential applicants to the appointed board of managers and critics of the takeover. Additionally, through a discourse of *inevitability*, officials portrayed the

takeover as an unavoidable process that was already underway, undermining speakers' efforts to question its legitimacy or stop it from proceeding.

Table 2

Codes for Categorizing Discourses Used by State Officials

Code	Description	Example
Narrowing the scope	Limiting the focus of the community information sessions to governance issues and the board of managers transition process; substituting the term *intervention* for *takeover*.	"The focus of this intervention by TEA is on the school board, not on the teachers, not on the students, not on the staff. This is on the school board of Houston ISD, that has historically not delivered for kids."
Role categorization	Classifying meeting participants as either potential board of managers applicants or agitators based on their compliance and emotional restraint; tailoring presentations to the former group while dismissing the latter.	"If you're here with us tonight, you're either considering applying to the Board of Managers or you're just curious about what role the Board will play in the future of Houston ISD."
Inevitability	Portraying the takeover as an unavoidable outcome resulting from chronic academic failure and as a process already-in-progress.	"We are implementing the process of implementing the intervention."

Narrowing the Scope

Officials attempted to narrow the scope of the information sessions to focus on the technical process for transitioning the district to state control. TEA administrators initially sought to limit the meetings to discussing the changes to the district's governance structure, and particularly the process of applying for and selecting the board of managers, rather than seeking to understand or engage with speakers' concerns about the takeover's potentially disruptive impacts to the Houston community. TEA embedded this narrow framing in the planned structure of the sessions, which prioritized the one-way transmission of information about the board of managers application and selection process over mechanisms for engaging community members in collaborative dialogue. Yet community members directly challenged officials' planned structure for the sessions, forcing changes to the organization of the meetings and creating space for them to voice their own concerns.

At the start of the first community information session, administrators attempted to restrict the meeting's focus to communicating the official process for appointing a board of managers. Dr. Doris Delaney, the TEA conservator appointed to the district, opened the session by emphasizing that the sole purpose of the meeting was to provide information about the board of managers process:

> DELANEY: It is our hope that you will leave this session with an understanding of the commitment that it takes to serve on the HISD board of managers . . . . The Texas Education Agency is here to provide information on the role of the board of

> managers and the process that it takes to apply to the board of managers. (KHOU 11, 2023a, 4:55)

Delaney continued by setting expectations for community participation, directing participants to hold all questions until after TEA's presentation was complete. Participants were also told they would need to submit their questions in writing and ensure that they directly pertained to the board of managers process:

> DELANEY: As a reminder, this is about the board of managers application and selection process. The only questions that are submitted tonight about those issues will be answered through the presenters, and there will also be an FAQ posted on the TEA website. (KHOU 11, 2023b, 5:59)

By restricting participants' questions to this narrow topic, officials aimed to steer discussion away from other concerns. This strategy became evident during the state's carefully orchestrated question-and-answer session, in which one TEA representative screened and selected from a set of participants' written questions before TEA Deputy Commissioner Alejandro Delgado answered them.

Despite officials' attempts to narrow the scope of the information sessions, community members repeatedly sought to raise their own concerns about the takeover. In response, session administrators strategically refocused attention back to governance issues. For example, in response to a written question submitted during the first meeting that asked why TEA was taking over HISD, Delgado responded by singling out the district's elected leadership for blame:

> DELGADO: This is not about the students, it's not about the teachers, it's not about the principals, not about the staff. This is about the school board, and this is about a subset of schools, a subset of kids that have been chronically underperforming for years. And so the focus of this, uh, intervention by TEA is on the school board, not on the teachers, not on the students, not on the staff. This is on the school board of Houston ISD, that has historically not delivered for kids. (KHOU 11, 2023a, 29:27)

In the second community information session, community members rejected the state's narrow focus on the board application and selection process. Using a megaphone to interrupt TEA's planned presentation, one speaker told Delgado, "We don't want to hear anything—nothing else about a board of managers. We are grown people. We gonna be respected here in Houston, Texas" (KHOU 11, 2023b, 16:49). Following this disruption, speakers proceeded to take control for the duration of the meeting, sharing the megaphone to voice their concerns about the takeover and the threats it posed to district teachers, students, and community members.

Commissioner Morath drew on this discourse of narrowing the scope in a March 15 interview with FOX 26 Houston, in which he restricted the justification for the takeover to governance issues in the district:

> MORATH: This action is not any kind of reflection of the students in Houston ISD, we've got amazing kids in Houston ISD. It is not a reflection of hardworking teachers. This is really focused on leadership at the absolute top. What, what is the governing team, the school board doing to ensure that they have provided the kinds of structured supports that students um, that students need. Not at just some schools, but at all schools. (FOX 26 Houston, 2023, 1:20)

In the information sessions and in media interviews, both Delgado and Morath furthered the discourse of narrowing the scope by deliberately avoiding the word *takeover*, opting instead for *intervention* or *action*. Referring to the state's actions in HISD as an *intervention* avoided suggestion of unequal power dynamics; instead, it connoted a strategic action to support a designated target. In contrast, *takeover* inherently implied a power imbalance, indicating one entity's control over another. Throughout the information sessions, as well as in state policy documents and media interviews, TEA officials consistently referred to the agency's actions in the district as an *intervention* or *action*, and never once used the term *takeover*. For example, in a March 29 interview with the *Houston Chronicle*, Morath's repeated characterization of the state's action in HISD as an *intervention* was so noticeable that opinion editor Lisa Falkenberg observed, "you probably don't like the word 'takeover'" (Falkenberg et al., 2023). By repeatedly characterizing the takeover as an intervention, state officials created ambiguity about the scope of TEA's actions in the district and obfuscated the unequal power dynamics structuring the implementation process.

Role Categorization

TEA officials employed the discourse of role categorization to classify HISD community members based on their adherence to established norms for public participation. They depicted potential board of managers applicants as their preferred attendees, commending their compliance, emotional restraint, and interest in learning about the board application and selection process. In contrast, they labeled community members who voiced concerns about the takeover as disruptors, deeming the emotional nature of their responses as disqualifying them from board leadership. This discourse intensified officials' efforts to narrow the scope by casting community concerns about issues beyond the board of managers application and selection process as irrelevant.

As an example of role categorization, Delgado began his presentation in the first session by specifying TEA's desired audience as only those individuals interested in learning about or applying for the board of managers: "if you're here with us tonight," he declared, "you're either considering applying to the board of managers or you're just curious about what role the Board will play in the future of Houston ISD" (KHOU 11, 2023a, 9:41). When community member Stephan Hester and other attendees interrupted his presentation to request the microphone, Delgado instructed audience members to hold their questions so he could communicate information to the potential board of managers applicants who, he assumed, were present in the audience:

> HESTER: We don't want to hear this. Y'all are taking our kids . . . . We got questions! We don't want to hear this.
> DELGADO: So, let me continue so we can go through the application process.
> HESTER: We stand united! No takeover! We don't want to hear this . . . Y'all are trying to push us out of our community. And I'm not no angry Black man, either. I see what you're doing. I'm not no angry Black man. I see what you're doing . . . Y'all tryna take my community! Y'all tryna take the Fifth Ward! Y'all tryna take Kashmere!
> AUDIENCE (chanting): Pass us the mic! Pass us the mic!
> DELGADO: Y'all, if you'd let me finish . . . . Let me just finish the presentation, it's short, and then we'll go . . . . Let me go through the slides. It'll be done in about ten minutes, and then we'll go through it. Cause I just—for those of you who are interested in becoming the board of managers, it's important for y'all to know. (KHOU 11, 2023a, 19:03)

In the second meeting, Delgado employed a similar framing to refocus discussion on delivering information to a preferred audience of potential board applicants. When speakers used a megaphone

to interrupt his presentation, Delgado stressed his desire to respond only to audience questions about the board of managers process:

> DELGADO: About half the questions we received last night . . . . were questions about this process and what is it about . . . . So I do want to make sure that people who have questions about this process, because we do have questions, who are interested in applying, interested in learning more. (KHOU 11, 2023b, 14:36)

By prioritizing pre-screened, written questions that focused on the board of managers process over those being asked aloud by community members present at the meeting, Delgado implied that these speakers lacked interest in learning about the board selection process.

In media interviews about the takeover, Commissioner Morath also categorized community members according to their level of emotional restraint. When asked about the community information sessions and the protests they had elicited in an interview with the *Houston Chronicle*, Morath classified meeting attendees based on their compliance with the expectations that had been set for participants:

> MORATH: I think probably people are motivated to come to townhall meetings for three different reasons: Some people want to hear the presentation, some people have questions and some people want to vent. So that's what's happening in those meetings. And it's, it's hard to actually serve all three constituents well in the same meeting format. (Morath, as cited in Falkenberg et al., 2023)

By equating the community protests that occurred during the meetings with *venting* and distinguishing this response from listening attentively, Morath suggested that attendees who interrupted the presentation to voice their frustrations constituted a distinct group from those interested in learning about the board of managers selection process. *Venting* implies that the emotions being expressed are exaggerated or overblown: a person who vents lacks the self-control to maintain a calm and professional demeanor. In this way, Morath categorized attendees based on their conduct, labeling them as either compliant—and thus qualified to apply for the board of managers—or as disruptors, whose emotional responses disqualified them from board leadership.

Inevitability

TEA administrators used a discourse of inevitability that allowed them to gloss over ambiguities in the applicability of the state's takeover law. Portraying HISD as a site of chronic academic underperformance and emphasizing TEA's obligation to abide by state mandates, officials framed the takeover as an outcome required by what they characterized as the district's persistent state of academic failure. As a result, they presented the takeover as an unavoidable process that was already underway, thwarting community members' efforts to challenge its legitimacy or block its implementation.

Deputy Commissioner Delgado repeatedly invoked a discourse of inevitability to justify the takeover. When asked during the first community meeting why TEA was taking over HISD, he asserted that state action was necessary because of "a subset of schools, a subset of kids that have been chronically underperforming for years" (KHOU 11, 2023a, 29:35). Ignoring the district's *B* and Wheatley's *C* rating in 2022, Delgado portrayed the district's failures as chronic and long-standing, presenting the takeover as necessary regardless of any recent improvements.

Delgado offered a similar justification for the takeover during the third community meeting in response to a line of questioning from NAACP Houston president Bishop James Dixon II. After Dixon attempted to highlight improvements made in HISD under the elected school board, Delgado responded by painting the district as persistently underperforming:

> DIXON: There's no logic to taking over a school that you graded with a B-plus. A passing grade should never get a failing punishment . . . . the teachers performed, and the students performed, and the parents performed, and the Board performed. A district with . . . a B+. You've got to—can you admit that that's winning?
> DELGADO: Sir, there continues to be a subset of students and campuses that are not performing.
> DIXON: No, no, no . . . . My question to you: Does a B-plus equal a winning grade?
> DELGADO: It's not an A. (KHOU 11, 2023c, 1:03:02)

Without specifying which students or campuses fell into the subset deemed "not performing," Delgado characterized HISD as demonstrating a pattern of systemic underperformance, disregarding the Acceptable rating the district received in 2022.

Commissioner Morath drew on the same discourse of inevitability to dismiss the claim that recent achievement gains made by the district invalidated the state's justification for the takeover. In a March 15, 2023, interview with FOX 26 Houston, Morath used this discourse to portray HISD as a site of longstanding academic failure:

> MORATH: It's true that several of the campuses that were chronically underperforming have now seen, um, slightly better improvement, and this should be celebrated . . . . But while that improves in one part of the district, another part of the district, you know, falls back. There are other campuses that have one year of acceptable performance and then immediately regressed. And it is, again it's a system problem. (FOX 26 Houston, 2023, 6:42)

Morath's characterization of HISD's underperformance as a "system problem" further undercut efforts to challenge the takeover's legitimacy. By referencing unspecified "other" campuses that had achieved a single acceptable rating "and then immediately regressed," he insinuated that schools like Wheatley, which had earned a *C* rating in 2022 after consecutive years of underperformance, represented anomalies from the district's longstanding pattern of underperformance. As a result, any improvements at these schools failed to invalidate the state's justification for the takeover.

Officials also used a discourse of inevitability to cast the takeover as a fait accompli. During the fourth community information session, Delgado responded to a question from an HISD parent about when the takeover would begin by equivocating about whether it had already taken effect:

> SPEAKER 9: So is it [the takeover] official?
> DELGADO: Yes, ma'am.
> SPEAKER 9: So it is official, you guys took over?
> DELGADO: We are—we are implementing the process of implementing the intervention. (KHOU 11, 2023d, 24:15)

Though the takeover of HISD would not become official until June 1, 2023—more than 13 weeks after the community information sessions occurred—Delgado portrayed it as a process that was already underway. Implied in this framing was the idea that, because the takeover was already "official," any attempts to halt the takeover or question its legitimacy would be fruitless, as the state's authorization made the implementation process irreversible.

Community Counter-Discourses to the State's Official Takeover Narrative

In addition to examining the official discourses that structure policymaking processes, CPA offers lenses for analyzing how nondominant groups respond to and resist policy and for uncovering the power dynamics that influence policy implementation (Diem et al., 2014). Analysis of

statements made by community members during the information sessions revealed two key counter-discourses that challenged the state's official takeover narrative (see Table 3). First, speakers used a counter-discourse that highlighted *organized neglect* by connecting the takeover to a pattern of state policies that had endangered the HISD community. Speakers used this counter-discourse to question whether the takeover truly served the best interests of Houston's children and families. Second, community members articulated a counter-discourse of *evading answerability* that criticized certain state leaders for their absence from the meetings and emphasized the undemocratic nature of the takeover. Speakers used this counter-discourse to link state leaders' reluctance to show up or take responsibility for the takeover to broader efforts to disenfranchise Houston's Black and Latino/a voters.

Table 3

Codes for Categorizing Counter-discourses Used by Community Members

Code	Description	Example
Organized neglect	Connecting the takeover to a pattern of state policies that harmed the Houston community through their failure to protect community members' health and safety.	"The idea that y'all in Austin, the Governor appointing Morath, are gonna care more than the people we voted for, to represent our kids? They can't keep guns out of our streets, they can't keep us safe during a pandemic, they can't keep us safe during a winter storm, but somehow they're going to care about our kids?"
Evading answerability	Criticizing key state leaders for their absence from the community information sessions; linking leaders' lack of accountability to the state's disenfranchisement of Black and Latino/a voters.	"We need Mike Morath and Greg Abbott to come up here and take accountability. We don't want to talk to you . . . We want to talk to the boss."

Organized Neglect

Across the community information sessions, speakers drew on a counter-discourse of organized neglect that linked the takeover to past instances in which Texas leaders had failed to protect Houston's most vulnerable residents. Despite officials' assertions that the takeover was in the district's best interests, community members contended that a historical pattern of neglect had broken their trust in state officials to oversee their children's education.

The state's organized neglect for the HISD community was reflected in the structure of the first two information sessions, which included no mechanism for participants to meaningfully voice concerns or engage in dialogue with facilitators. During these meetings, TEA officials denied community members access to a microphone and repeatedly requested their attentiveness, compliance, and silence as they delivered the same planned presentation. Nevertheless, an important shift in meeting dynamics occurred during the first information session when U.S. Representative Sheila Jackson Lee, who represents Houston's 18th district, unexpectedly took the stage to interrupt Delgado. Departing from TEA's agenda, Jackson Lee expressed her opposition to the structure of the meetings and the takeover itself. Jackson Lee offered a contrasting perspective of the takeover

that highlighted the state's failure to acknowledge HISD's struggles during the COVID-19 pandemic:

> JACKSON LEE: The doors of our district stayed open to the most catastrophic period that most of us have experienced in our lifetime, short of war, on our soil, and that was a pandemic. Can you imagine, that we held on? . . . . I really think TEA and the governor of the state of Texas should take into consideration the challenges that we overcame during the pandemic . . . . They're insisting on the STAAR test. They're not letting the children breathe. After the pandemic, you're gonna come down hard on these children and teachers when they have been miraculous, and they have gotten through the pandemic . . . . We'll never get to breathe. (KHOU 11, 2023a, 48:58)

Likening the takeover and its associated accountability pressures to a suffocating force, Jackson Lee portrayed the state's actions as jeopardizing the safety and well-being of the district's children. This stark departure from TEA's official narrative gave community members license to invoke similar imagery and challenge the takeover by linking it to other perceived policy failures.

These challenges began at the start of the second information session, when community members used a megaphone to interrupt Delgado as he presented the same information shared in the first meeting. One speaker, local activist Travis McGee, shifted the dynamics of the meeting by demanding repeatedly that Delgado pause his presentation and listen to community members' concerns. Referencing Jackson Lee's speech in first meeting, McGee stressed that members of the HISD community—not elected officials—should be the ones asking questions and holding those in power accountable: "if a politician walk in here, do not allow them to speak . . . We not for that tonight. That's what happened last night, but it's not gonna happen tonight" (KHOU 11, 2023b, 17:01). After McGee spoke, more than thirty other community members used the megaphone to ask Delgado questions and critique the takeover—a dynamic that continued through the third and fourth meetings after TEA eventually yielded and provided speakers a microphone.

Highlighting a pattern of organized neglect in state policies beyond education, several speakers scrutinized the motivations of state leaders in pursuing the takeover. Drawing connections between the takeover and past instances in which state leaders had exhibited disregard for the health and safety of the Houston community, one speaker challenged the idea that state leaders genuinely cared about the well-being of their children:

> SPEAKER 31: The idea that y'all in Austin, the Governor appointing Morath, are gonna care more than the people we voted for, to represent our kids? They can't keep guns out of our streets. They can't keep us safe during a pandemic. They can't keep us safe during a winter storm. But somehow they're going to care about our kids? (KHOU 11, 2023b, 59:40)

Speakers also referenced the state's failure to mitigate the damage caused by Hurricane Harvey, efforts to overturn election results in Houston's Harris County, chronic underfunding of health care, and the Governor's mishandling of the school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, as additional evidence fueling their skepticism toward promises that state leaders would promote the district's best interests.

Speakers also highlighted the state's organized neglect by invoking metaphors likening the takeover to an act of racial violence. One speaker characterized the takeover as an attack on the district's Hispanic community (KHOU 11, 2023b, 18:07), while another compared it to a lynching of the district (KHOU 11, 2023d, 45:41). Still another HISD parent described the state's decision to pursue the takeover after systematically underfunding the district as criminal: "If you were at a bank,

you'd be robbing a bank. You're robbing our community" (KHOU 11, 2023c, 52:16). By alleging that leaders had exploited takeover as an opportunity to cause deliberate harm, these critiques went beyond framing the takeover as an act of neglect to presenting it as violent assault on the Houston community.

Evading Answerability

In each of the community information sessions, speakers pointed to Governor Abbott's and Commissioner Morath's palpable absence as evidence of the state's evasion of answerability to the HISD community. These officials' unwillingness to attend even one of the four information sessions prompted speakers to voice feelings of disrespect and to reject assurances from TEA representatives that their concerns would be taken seriously. Speakers also cited the takeover's removal of their democratic rights as an additional example of state leaders avoiding answerability, as the community lost its power to hold leaders accountable through their vote. Community members framed this evasion of answerability in racialized terms, portraying White state leaders' unwillingness to engage with Houston's Black and Latino/a communities as evidence of the racist logic guiding the takeover.

In all four meetings, participants insisted on speaking directly with Commissioner Morath and Governor Abbott. Dismissing the TEA staff in attendance as powerless, speakers repeatedly asked where the Governor and the Commissioner were, and why they had chosen not to attend. During the third community information session, community member Stephan Hester confronted Delgado about their absence, underscoring the disrespect the community experienced as a result:

> HESTER: How can you . . . say that y'all have respect for the people in this community and your boss and the governor don't show up? Can you answer that question, sir?
> DELGADO: So I—I just want to say, I'm sorry Commissioner Morath could not be here tonight . . . . He deeply, deeply cares about this community.
> HESTER: Where is he at? What is so important that he closed down the biggest district in his state and he's not here. Where is he at? That's what we want to talk about.
> DELGADO: He could not be here tonight.
> HESTER: Where is he? Where is he? (pause) Where is he?
> DELGADO: I'm answering the question. He could not be here tonight. (KHOU 11, 2023c, 5:56)

Though Delgado assured attendees that the Commissioner "deeply cares" about the HISD community, Morath did not attend any of the four information sessions.

Morath's absence became a point of contention for when Delgado appeared unprepared or unwilling to address speakers' inquiries. After Delgado admitted he did not know the answer to a question regarding the costs associated with the outgoing superintendent's contract, one speaker responded:

> SPEAKER 9: You don't know? Do you think Morath knows? If Morath had been here, would he have been able to answer that question?
> DELGADO: I'm not sure.
> SPEAKER 9: Oh you're not—you're not especially well-equipped to answer our questions. (KHOU 11, 2023c, 27:00)

Speakers also criticized Governor Abbott, perceiving his absence from the meetings as a clear sign of disrespect for their community. In the second information session, Hester pointed out that Abbott had appeared the night before at a rally promoting school vouchers at a Christian school in

northwest Houston, located only miles away: "He [Abbott] went to Cypress last night to a private school, and didn't attempt—he didn't answer to none of us minorities here" (KHOU 11, 2023b, 10:25).

Speakers also called attention to the racial politics motivating the decision to send TEA Deputy Commissioner Alejandro Delgado, a Latino man, to lead the community information sessions, while the state's White governor and education commissioner remained absent. During the second community information session, Hester directly challenged Delgado's authority: "They sent you here to get the Hispanic people on your side. You are nothing but a shill. We need Mike Morath and Greg Abbott to come up here and take accountability. We don't want to talk to you . . . We want to talk to the boss" (KHOU 11, 2023b, 13:40). By intentionally selecting Delgado facilitate the information sessions, TEA spotlighted Delgado's Latino racial identity while concealing the state's White Governor and Commissioner behind a power structure that did not compel their attendance nor require their answerability to community members.

Community members also emphasized the undemocratic nature of the takeover's implementation, focusing on its racialized disenfranchisement of HISD voters. Multiple speakers invoked the phrase "taxation without representation" to characterize the state's treatment of Houston's Black voters, with one even equating the takeover with colonization:

> SPEAKER 11: Let me say that we are not your colony. You overturn our laws, you overturn our elections, you seize our resources, and you say we are not capable of administering ourselves . . . . This has nothing to do with education policy or children. This is a power grab from people who run our state, who are little more than insurrectionists . . . . How can TEA justify, given the history of this city, this state, this nation . . . removing an elected school board in what was just sixty years ago . . . a Jim Crow city? (KHOU 11, 2023c, 29:30)

Using a counter-discourse of evading answerability, speakers attempted to expose the hypocrisy of the state holding HISD schools accountable for meeting achievement standards while state leaders evaded answerability to the HISD community.

Discussion and Implications

To expand understandings of the discursive aspects of policy implementation and their relationship to the unequal power dynamics structuring education policy, this study drew on principles of CPA to investigate the policy discourses shaping the early phases of takeover implementation in Houston during a series of community information sessions hosted by TEA. Analysis of the community information sessions revealed the conflicting sets of policy discourses state officials and community members employed to frame the takeover. TEA officials attempted to narrow the scope of the meetings to the board of managers application and selection process, categorized participants based on their level of compliance and emotional restraint, and framed state intervention as the inevitable outcome of systemic district dysfunction. In response, community members attempted to seize control of the meetings and expand their scope by connecting the takeover to a pattern of state-produced crises and criticizing state leaders for evading answerability to the community. These contrasting discourses exposed a gap between the state's rhetoric and the reality of the takeover's implementation and revealed how TEA officials relied on and reproduced unequal power dynamics to legitimize their approach.

Researchers have illustrated how state takeovers reinforce a racialized disciplinary dynamic that reconstructs the democratic engagement of marginalized communities as a threat to the smooth

implementation of state education policy—a phenomenon Morel (2018) describes as a *conservative education logic* and Wright et al. (2020) refer to as a *punitive neoliberal disciplinary apparatus*. This disciplinary dynamic implies that improving academic outcomes for students of color necessitates the political disempowerment of their communities. By disregarding community members' concerns and provoking emotional responses from speakers—which were then used to justify their disqualification from board leadership—officials' policy discourses positioned the democratic participation of the HISD community as an obstacle to academic improvement, thus necessitating the community's continued disciplinary management.

Since the takeover of HISD was initiated in June 2023, state-appointed superintendent Mike Miles has leveraged this disciplinary dynamic to restructure board of managers meetings and reprimand district employees for expressing dissent. Dismissing the community resistance he has encountered as "noise" (B. Erickson, 2023) resulting from "community or other status-quo bias in the system" (Carpenter, 2023), Miles has opted not to attend board public comment periods, significantly reduced seating capacity in board meetings, and had teachers who attempted to enter arrested and charged with criminal trespassing (Dunlap, 2023; Zuvanich, 2023). In the first year under takeover, HISD terminated or reassigned hundreds of teachers and principals, many of whom were targeted because they publicly criticized mandated changes to curriculum and instruction or expressed concerns about district directives (Bauman, 2023; Lehrer-Small, 2023; Mizan, 2024). Miles's actions demonstrate how the policy discourses invoked by TEA officials during the community information sessions foreshadowed the disciplinary approach he would adopt as superintendent. Thus, there is a need for further research exploring how the discourses invoked during the early stages of takeover set the tone for policies implemented after takeover becomes effective.

By drawing attention to the unequal power relations that structure policy processes, this study also emphasizes that people's emotional responses to policy and the strategies officials employ to manage these responses offer key insights into the meanings that policies hold for affected communities. Because of takeover's tendency to assign blame for academic underperformance to the communities it targets, its implementation often provokes strong emotional responses, particularly when community members feel state officials ignore or dismiss their concerns. For example, in an analysis of the Holyoke Public Schools' state receivership placement, Fried (2020) revealed how the takeover implementation process produced feelings of grief and uncertainty that undermined opportunities for collaboration between state and district leaders. Though state leaders deliberately avoided the term "takeover," opting instead for the more passive (and ambiguous) "receivership," local actors' emotional responses reduced trust and heightened resistance to a takeover they perceived as hostile. Responding to Fried's call for researchers to examine how state officials manage relationships with other constituent groups beyond the district central office amid takeover implementation, this study extends CPA as a framework for analyzing the emotional dimensions of takeover for affected communities.

This study's findings have vital implications for researchers, leaders, and communities, both in the US and internationally. First, scholars of international education policy have observed that as the top-down, accountability-driven approach to education reform popularized in the US and other predominantly White, western nations has become globalized (Lewis & Lingard, 2016) and institutionalized as the "master rationale for contemporary education reform" (Meyer et al., 2014, p. 2), a growing number of countries have relied on test performance data to justify disruptive changes to the management and governance of education systems (Parcerisa et al., 2020; Straubhaar, 2017). These shifts have contributed to the rise of an "evaluative state" that directs education systems from a distance through the application of sanctions and interventions designed without input from the communities they target (Parcerisa & Falabella, 2017). Researchers across national contexts could

draw on CPA to examine how policymakers have deployed these accountability systems to narrow their focus attention on achievement-based measures of school performance while undermining international efforts to increase educational equity (Sahlberg, 2023). Considering the variety of accountability logics guiding international education systems (Kim & Yun, 2019), researchers could also apply CPA to comparatively analyze various national approaches for implementing accountability policy and attend to the discursive strategies officials have employed to justify heightened external controls over education systems and evaluative modes of education governance (Straubhaar, 2016).

Second, researchers should continue to apply critical approaches like CPA to analyze the discourses that guide education policy implementation. CPA helps focus researchers' attention on the experiences of people directly affected by takeovers and other top-down education reforms and provides a framework that researchers and communities can use to hold decision-makers accountable (Horsford et al., 2019), making it a powerful framework to guide collaborative research in partnership with communities. Such community-based studies of takeover could engage grassroots advocates, families, and youth in the process of co-constructing research agendas with the goal of building community capacity to sustain improvement efforts (e.g., Ishimaru, 2018; Kirshner & Jefferson, 2015). Incorporating principles of CPA in the design of these community-based studies would also help attune researchers to the racialized power dynamics of doing research in/with marginalized communities, lessening the risk of pathologizing these communities through damage-centered research that ignores their agency and strategies of resistance (Tuck, 2009).

Third, educational leaders must reckon with the racially discriminatory history that has produced the contemporary context for takeovers in the US and recognize how punitive school accountability systems often disempower the very constituents they claim to serve (Lipman, 2013; Scott & Holme, 2016). When such policies are designed and implemented from an ahistorical perspective, they risk perpetuating racialized discourses of deficit and intensifying community resistance (Wright & Kim, 2022). Instead, leaders and policymakers should listen to the counter-discourses local advocates articulate in response to these reforms and collaboratively engage communities in the school improvement process. These engagement efforts could involve dialoguing with community members and local policy actors to understand the present and historical barriers and opportunities they perceive as influencing their children's academic outcomes. Such an approach would begin to undo the entrenched, racialized patterns of organized neglect that top-down accountability reforms like takeover have imposed on marginalized groups.

Finally, as communities adjust to an increasingly undemocratic education policy landscape marked by more frequent state takeovers, they will need to adapt their advocacy strategies if they hope to reset dominant discourses of education reform (Cohen et al., 2018). Communities subject to takeovers and other top-down accountability interventions could use tactics of strategic disruption, similar to those deployed in the Houston context, to challenge official state narratives and advance counter-discourses highlighting state leaders' organized neglect and evasion of answerability. The grassroots resistance strategies emerging in Houston could serve as examples for other education activists, particularly as they seek to situate reforms implemented in their own communities within a broader sociopolitical context of organized state abandonment.

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About the Author

Daniel I. Dawer
The University of Texas at Austin
Daniel.dawer@utexas.edu
https://orcid.org/0009-0002-1951-8427
Daniel Dawer is a doctoral student in the Educational Policy and Planning Program at the University of Texas at Austin. His research interests include accountability policy implementation, educator working conditions, and community-based collaboration for school improvement.

About the Editors

Vidya Shah
York University
vidshah@edu.yorku.ca
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3413-9994
Dr. Vidya Shah is an educator, scholar and activist committed to equity and racial justice in the service of liberatory education. She is an associate professor in the Faculty of Education at York University, and her research explores anti-racist and decolonial approaches to leadership in schools, communities, and school districts.

Caitlin C. Farrell
University of Colorado Boulder
caitlin.farrell@colorado.edu
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7589-4921

Caitlin C. Farrell is an associate research professor at the University of Colorado Boulder School of Education. Her work focuses on the dynamics of school district policymaking and the relationship between research and practice for school improvement and transformation.

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