# When Equity Leadership Keeps White Leaders in Control: A Whiteness as Property Analysis of District Equity Work

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**Abstract:** Globally, schools continue to espouse commitments to equity and racial justice, yet racialized opportunity gaps continue to exist in schools, especially schools located in urban communities. In this research, we offer an empirically based explanation for this phenomenon by demonstrating how white district leaders resist enacting meaningful district improvement when it could require them to relinquish white peoples' control of leadership. Specifically, we draw on critical race theory's tenet of whiteness as property to reveal the ways white leaders work to maintain their propertied interest in leadership and the related benefits as opposed to engaging in the types of deep practice-changing equity work required to shift organizational practices in ways to generate equitable learning opportunities for youth of color. Implications of this research call for researchers and leadership preparation programs to invest in preparing leaders who are able to center shifting professional practices over maintaining access to the benefits of leadership.

**Cuando el liderazgo en equidad mantiene a líderes blancos en el poder: Un análisis de la blancura como propiedad en el trabajo de equidad a nivel distrital**
**Resumen:** A nivel global, las escuelas continúan proclamando compromisos con la equidad y la justicia racial, pero las brechas racializadas en las oportunidades persisten, especialmente en escuelas ubicadas en comunidades urbanas. En esta investigación, ofrecemos una explicación empírica para este fenómeno al demostrar cómo los líderes distritales blancos resisten implementar mejoras significativas en los distritos cuando esto podría requerir que renuncien al control que tienen sobre el liderazgo como personas blancas. Específicamente, nos basamos en el principio de la teoría crítica de la raza que define la blancura como propiedad para revelar cómo los líderes blancos trabajan para mantener su interés de propiedad en el liderazgo y los beneficios asociados, en lugar de comprometerse con los tipos de trabajo en equidad que transforman prácticas organizacionales de manera que generen oportunidades de aprendizaje equitativas para jóvenes de color. Las implicaciones de esta investigación llaman a los investigadores y programas de formación de líderes a invertir en preparar líderes capaces de priorizar la transformación de prácticas profesionales sobre el mantenimiento del acceso a los beneficios del liderazgo.
**Palabras clave:** teoría crítica de la raza; blancura como propiedad; liderazgo distrital; mejora consciente de la raza

**Quando a liderança em equidade mantém líderes brancos no poder: Uma análise da branquitude como propriedade no trabalho de equidade distrital**
**Resumo:** Globalmente, as escolas continuam proclamando compromissos com a equidade e a justiça racial, mas as lacunas racializadas de oportunidades persistem, especialmente em escolas localizadas em comunidades urbanas. Nesta pesquisa, oferecemos uma explicação empírica para esse fenômeno ao demonstrar como líderes distritais brancos resistem a implementar melhorias significativas no distrito quando isso pode exigir que abram mão do controle do poder de liderança pelos brancos. Especificamente, baseamo-nos no princípio da teoria crítica da raça que define a branquitude como propriedade para revelar como líderes brancos trabalham para manter seu interesse de propriedade no poder de liderança e os benefícios associados, em vez de se engajar nos tipos de trabalho em equidade que mudam práticas organizacionais de forma a gerar oportunidades de aprendizado equitativas para jovens de cor. As implicações desta pesquisa apontam para a necessidade de que pesquisadores e programas de formação de lideranças invistam em preparar líderes capazes de priorizar a transformação de práticas profissionais em detrimento da manutenção do acesso aos benefícios da liderança.
**Palavras-chave:** teoria crítica da raça; branquitude como propriedade; liderança distrital; melhoria consciente de raça

# When Equity Leadership Keeps White Leaders in Control: A Whiteness as Property Analysis of District Equity Work

Globally, educational leaders continue to struggle to meet the needs of historically marginalized students. Our research centers leadership in urban districts that serve predominately students of color while being led by predominately white leadership teams. Research demonstrates that racialized inequities continue to exist within these schools despite increased focus on race-

conscious educational practices (Bertrand, 2014; Fass et al., 2018; Salisbury, 2020a; Sheth & Salisbury, 2022). Scholars have posited this exists in part because educational leaders (typically white men) receive praise for claiming engagement in equity-minded work as opposed to making substantive changes in actual practices designed to disrupt racialized inequities in schools (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014; Salisbury, 2021). As a result, there is a need to understand the type of race-conscious work that school leaders engage in, the motivations for this work, and the ways this work actively disrupts white supremacist colonial practices deeply ingrained in educational institutions. Throughout this manuscript, race-conscious leadership is defined as leadership that intentionally centers white supremacy and racialized opportunity gaps in ways that place race at the center of leadership action and decision-making (Irby, 2022). Our goal in this research is to demonstrate how white leaders engage in shallow or espoused race-conscious leadership as a tool to maintain their propertied interest in school leadership and maintain their access to the property benefits that are tethered to being a school leader.

Drawing on critical race theory's tenet of whiteness as property (Harris, 1993) enabled us to interrogate the leadership practices of white district leaders that failed to disrupt inequities experienced by students of color and simultaneously ensured white individuals maintained access to leadership positions, power, and benefits. White leaders were concurrently attempting to lead in race-conscious ways that could better support students of color while working to protect white peoples' propertied interest in leadership and the benefits that accompany possessing the property of leadership. For example, as demonstrated in our findings section, white leaders engaged students of color as convenient instruments to achieve recognition for equity work while simultaneously excluding and marginalizing youth of color when transformative change was called for that demonstrated the possibility of decolonizing white leadership practices towards racial justice. Placed in an understanding of the bullying aspects of whiteness and white supremacy and the historical reality of white people working to maintain their propertied interest in whiteness, this makes sense (Harris, 1996; Leonardo, 2015; Salisbury, 2021)

In the following sections, we first discuss existing research on race-conscious school improvement and white leaders leading race-conscious/equity-minded school improvement. Second, we will discuss critical race theory's theoretical framework, whiteness as property, and racial fortuity. Lastly, we discuss the methods and data analysis techniques we employed in conducting this research. Finally, we discuss findings from the research and put those findings in conversation with existing literature. It is essential to define some terms used throughout this manuscript. When using the term "students or youth of color," we refer to students who identify as Black, Latiné, Asian American, Multi-racial, or Indigenous.

## Equity-Minded Improvement

For schools to improve in race-conscious ways, leaders need to intentionally focus on equity-minded improvement that explicitly addresses inequities such as racism present in their schools and districts (Irby, 2021; Irby et al., 2022; Shah et al., 2022). While engaging in race-conscious improvement work in K-12 settings is highly challenging, there are added complexities in doing this work as district leaders due to heightened political pressures, leading large systems, and competing accountability policies (Holme et al., 2014; Welton et al., 2015). As a result, socially-just and race-conscious educational improvement work is less conceptually defined when looking at the district level compared to the school level (Irby et al., 2022; Ishimaru et al., 2023). Understandings of district leaders' work related to equity is nebulous in large part because of their distance from classrooms; this is especially true in larger urban districts. However, the literature clearly shows that district leaders engage in specific tasks to shape district actions and policies related to equity. These include

developing organizational structures that prioritize equity and strengthen organizational capacity around equity, promoting an understanding of equity-centered pedagogy, aligning district resources towards equity goals, and communicating a clear message on the centrality of equity to the district's work (Anderson, 2022; Irby et al., 2022; Rorrer et al., 2008).

District leaders that center establishing organizational routines that prioritize equity and strengthen organizational capacity ensure that all work in the district is aligned and coherent related to equity goals (Anderson, 2022). This requires leaders to shift professional learning schedules, reconceptualize the district organizational chart to ensure equity work is appropriately supported, critically assess existing structures and routines for their alignment with new equity goals, and establish routines that foreground equity talk (Anderson, 2022; Irby et al., 2022 Rorrer et al. 2008; Salisbury, 2020b). District leaders intentionally focus on developing a shared understanding of equity-centered pedagogy through leveraging the above-mentioned structures towards professional learning, accessing external expertise related to pedagogical practices, and nurturing and recognizing internal expertise (Rorrer et al., 2008; Turner, 2015).

Beyond establishing organizational routines and establishing a commitment to an equity pedagogy, district leaders align district resources toward an equity agenda by increasing district-wide coherence around equity in ways that limit the use of resources toward competing interests, center equity in all district decisions and processes (i.e., hiring, budget, student conduct policies), and strategically utilizing external accountability mandates to promote internal accountability (Anderson, 2022; Knapp & Feldman, 2012; Rorrer et al., 2008; Trujillo, 2012). Lastly, equity-minded district leaders clearly communicate and prioritize the district's commitments to equity to all stakeholders and in all environments to establish a clear focus and purpose across the district (Anderson, 2022; Trujillo, 2012).

## White Leaders Taking Up Race-Conscious Work

Based on the overwhelming number of school districts and schools led by white individuals, it is inevitable that white leaders are often the individuals leading race-conscious improvement efforts. For example, in the United States, more than 90% of superintendents who reported their race identified as white in the 2020 American Association of Superintendents' *The American Superintendent 2020 Decennial Study* (Tienken, 2021). White leaders leading schools through equity work is not just a question of demographics; the power of whiteness is constantly at play and impacting the ways that white individuals engage in equity-centered leadership (Radd & Tanetha, 2019; Salisbury, 2020a; Swanson & Welton, 2019; Theoharis & Haddix, 2011; Welton et al., 2019). The impacts of whiteness on white leaders' race-conscious work are far-ranging and deeply impactful as they include who can be a school leader, the professional learning content, pre-service and in-service school leaders experience, the capacity and comfort level of white individuals leading the work, and the reward structures in place for white people leading work that espouses racial justice.

From a structural perspective, research demonstrates how leadership standards align with whiteness and concretize the understanding that leadership and whiteness are either synonymous or tightly correlated (Davis et al., 2015). Further leadership practices, learning, and research have privileged white norms of leadership and established those as the norms by which future leaders are assessed (Gooden & Dantley, 2012). These two forces have created conditions where white individuals who are charged with leading race-conscious improvement often lack the knowledge and skills required for the work. Instead, these individuals end up drawing from cultural models, professional standards, and professional learning that are incapable of supporting their work toward the desired ends.

A burgeoning area of research related to white individuals leading race-conscious improvement focuses on how white leaders benefit from claiming to engage in this work, the ways in which white leaders benefit from the work, and how white leaders act to protect their status as leaders through their equity work. Specifically, scholars have demonstrated that white leaders often receive disproportionate benefits for enacting a race-conscious agenda where they receive substantial benefits while students of color do not receive benefits or increased learning opportunities (Jones et al., 2003; Salisbury, 2020a, 2021). Additional scholarship brings attention to white individuals' leadership moves to maintain their status as leaders and the related propertied expectations (Khalifa, 2020; Ray, 2019; Salisbury, 2021; Salisbury et al., 2020). Overwhelmingly, this body of scholarship demonstrates that white leaders are willing to promote equity or racial justice up to the point where their status as leaders is called into question, at which point they engage protective maneuvers to maintain ownership of leadership so they can continue to receive the benefits bestowed through the positional power associated with leadership.

From a critical race theory in education perspective (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), these phenomena make sense. Research relying on interest convergence (Bell, 2004) highlights how white leaders are willing to engage in race-conscious leadership as long as they benefit from the action (Daramola et al., 2023). But, once the benefits of race-conscious improvement stop for white leaders, they cease to engage the practices any further. Daramola and colleagues (2023) highlighted how this practice limited the depth of transformative change within districts—especially districts with white leaders. Using racial fortuity—the understanding that race-conscious decisions made without the contributions of people of color will always benefit white people (Bell, 2004), Salisbury (2022) demonstrates how white building-level leaders center their needs over the needs of students of color as a mechanism to promote their status as leaders and future professional goals.

## Theoretical Framework

We draw on critical race theory (Bell, 1992; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) as our theoretical framework in this research. Critical race theory (CRT) centers on understanding how white supremacy negatively impacts the lived realities of communities of color (Crenshaw, 1988). Within educational contexts, CRT enables scholarship to investigate how educational systems, practices, and beliefs structurally marginalize communities of color and privileged white communities (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Broadly, CRT draws on the permanence of racism, interest convergence, intersectionality, whiteness as property, critique of liberalism, and counterstorytelling (Decuir & Dixson, 2004). Within our research, CRT provided a mechanism to interrogate leadership practices in the Plains City School District (PCSD) and question how those practices worked to disrupt white supremacy and maintain privileges for white stakeholders.

In this research, we drew most heavily from CRT's tenet of whiteness as property as it created opportunities to delve deeply into the practices of the almost exclusively white leadership team of PCSD and to unearth how much of the district's race-conscious leadership advanced the interests of white people over the interests of communities of color. Whiteness as property contends that whiteness operates as property within U.S. society and, as a result, provides material benefits to those who possess it (Harris, 1995). Further, whiteness as property contends that white people operate in specific ways to maintain their propertied interest in whiteness and its related manifestations—school leadership, in this research. Specifically, Harris (1995) demonstrates that whiteness meets the definition of property because it meets the following four legal definitions of property: (1) Right of disposition—a recognition that not all property is transferable/sellable but still provides the owner with the expected benefit. For example, a teaching or principal certification, which the process of earning through higher education is steeped in white supremacy, offers the

owner access to certain professions and related benefits, but they cannot be sold. (2) Right to use and enjoyment—an understanding that possessing an object ensures the owner can use and enjoy the property. For example, being able to fully experience and enjoy the privileges of being a district leader because of societal conceptualizations of leaders being white males (Salisbury, 2021). (3) Reputation and status property—an understanding that an individual's status and reputation provide access to resources and protection from specific negative experiences. For example, white people are not being followed in a department store or white leaders benefiting from their reputation as an equity warrior. (4) Absolute right to exclude—the ability to exclude individuals from accessing a given property or its associated privileges and, for example, discrediting or ignoring the leadership work of youth of color because they do not "hold" a formal leadership position. Understanding whiteness as property supported us in conceptualizing and unpacking the leadership moves of white individuals that excluded people of color while simultaneously benefiting them as white leaders.

Critical scholarship in educational leadership is beginning to rely more on whiteness as property as a framework to unearth the reasons that white leaders struggle in enacting race-conscious improvement efforts (see Salisbury 2019, 2020, 2021; Daramola et al., 2023). Whiteness as property allows scholars to begin their inquiry from a place of understanding that racism is structurally permanent and that white people have invested in maintaining their propertied interests in whiteness (Harris, 1995). This starting point provides a meaningful jumping off point to understanding why so many equity initiatives led by white people fail to meet their espoused goals. As a theoretical framework, whiteness as property pushed us to dig into the leadership practices deployed in PCSD that espoused race consciousness. Specifically, it provided a lens to question the impacts of leadership practices within the district and to tease out how white leaders espoused race-conscious actions solidified their ownership of leadership.

## Methods

In this research, we drew on a critical qualitative methodology to understand how commitments of leaders in Plains City School District (PCSD) to race-consciousness were overshadowed by their investment in maintaining their propertied rights in school leadership. Specifically, we engaged in a case study design (Stake, 1995) to understand leadership actions across the district. This study spanned three years when PCSD was actively involved in implementing an equity agenda stemming from community and school board pressure. Sources of data included interviews with district leaders, focus groups with youth leaders, observations, documents, and publicly available media.

### Context

Prairie City is a medium-sized urban community in the Midwest region of the United States. At the time of this study, approximately 250,000 people lived in Prairie City, and PCSD served around 35,000 students across almost 40 schools. Like many mid-sized urban communities across the globe, Prairie underwent substantial demographic shifts over the decade before this study, shifting from a predominantly white community to a predominately of color community. PCSD mirrored this demographic shift during the decade yet lagged in making shifts to professional practices. Instead, it was common to hear veteran district employees situate students of color from larger urban cities and refugees from around the globe as the primary issue facing PCSD.

While PCSD's student body was racially diverse at the time of this research (see Table 1 for details), leadership (district and school) and teachers were predominantly white. At the district level, the superintendent and the four associate superintendents were all white; 10 were white amongst the

12 highest-ranking leaders. Further, almost 90% of building leaders were white, and more than 80% of teachers were white.

**Table 1**

*PCSD Student Demographics (Race)[1]*

| Race | Percentage |
| --- | --- |
| Asian | 7% |
| Black | 19% |
| Indigenous | 1% |
| Latiné | 26% |
| Multiracial | 6% |
| White | 44% |

PCSD was purposefully sampled for this research because they implemented equity-based work and had a district vision grounded in equity. As our study began, PCSD identified the following initiatives as their "equity work." First, an instructional framework from a nationally known consulting firm. The framework was not grounded in culturally relevant practices and instead focused on increasing academic rigor and shared practices across classrooms. The instructional framework was the centerpiece of the district's equity improvement work in large part because of the immense financial commitment from the district—above $5,000,000, which was partially funded through a grant. Aligned with the instructional framework, the district implemented a standards-based grading system. This system was seen as a way to ensure that students were assessed in ways directly connected to what was being taught in classrooms. As with the instructional framework, the model of standards referenced grading PCSD implemented was not grounded in equity or cultural relevance; instead, it advocated that assessment was a technical task that needed to be aligned to curricular standards.

Beyond instructional improvement, PCSD's equity work centered on implementing a youth voice initiative to increase district leaders' access to youth experiences. The youth voice initiative essentially included sizing up an existing program from a single school to the entire district. Within this work, students from the PCSD's five high schools met weekly to work on improving the district with the support of two teachers. Finally, PCSD implemented a model of cultural competence through a book study and professional learning led by two university faculty members. This work targeted building leadership teams and district leaders, not including the superintendent or associate superintendents. Professional learning sessions occurred once per month, with approximately 200 people attending. It is important to note that the cultural competence work did not center on organizational practices and instead centered individual actions and beliefs.

**Sources of Data**

Data sources included focus groups, observations, interviews, documents/artifacts, and publicly available information; all data were collected across three years. All data collection focused on how PCSD leadership conceptualized and enacted equity-minded leadership practices with an espoused goal of supporting youth of color.

Interviews were conducted with 21 district leaders and teachers, with two interviews conducted with 9 of those individuals— all of whom were district leaders. Each interview lasted

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[1] Percentages in Table 1 add up to more than 100% due to rounding and adjusting data to maintain the anonymity of PCSD.

between 60 and 90 minutes and was transcribed for analysis. All interviews were open-ended and focused on PCSD's equity work and the individual's role in the work. Beyond interviews, three focus groups were conducted with 38 youth in the district's youth voice initiative. All but one of the youth identified as a person of color. Each focus group lasted more than 90 minutes and centered on the district's equity issues, youths' ideas of addressing those inequities, and the youth voice work in the district. The first 15 minutes of each focus group were spent developing trust between the youth and the first author. Additionally, through ongoing participant observations, the youth had an existing relationship with author 1. While 21 district leaders were interviewed for this study, Table 2 highlights the leaders quoted throughout this manuscript; Prairie City and all individual names presented throughout this manuscript are pseudonyms to maintain the confidentiality of participants.

**Table 2**

*Quoted Participants*

| Name | Role | Race |
|------|------|------|
| Jeff | Superintendent | White |
| Steve | Associate Superintendent of Academics | White |
| Chris | Associate Superintendent of Secondary Schools | White |
| Ben | Associate Superintendent of Elementary Schools | White |
| Tim | Associate Superintendent of Culture and Climate | White |
| Mike | Secondary School Principal Coach | Black |
| Kelly | Youth Voice Coordinator and Teacher | White |

Observations were conducted across the three-year study, with the majority being participant observations (Musante & DeWalt, 2010). Participant observations were conducted of the youth voice initiative, cultural competence training, and district leadership team meetings; non-participant interviews were conducted of professional learning sessions related to the instructional framework, standards-referenced grading, and school board meetings. There were more than 1,000 hours of observation across the three years; typically, the first author was engaged in observations multiple times weekly. Data from all observations were collected via field notes.

Documents, such as PowerPoint decks, meeting agendas, or school improvement plans, were collected during all observations. Additionally, publicly available documents and resources were collected, such as past school board meeting agendas and minutes, mission and vision statements from district websites, and local media coverage. More than 200 documents were collected across the three years of data collection.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis started with data reduction, where we read all interview and focus group transcripts, field notes, and documents. The first author relied on NVivo to conduct data reduction and analysis. During data reduction, our inclusion criteria were if the data source was broadly talking about equity-minded work, inequities within PCSD, an individual's work towards equity, or the vision and mission of the district. Data reduction allowed us to gain intimate knowledge of the data and be immersed before analysis. Once our data reduction was completed, we conducted a two-cycle analysis (Saldaña, 2011) across all data sources.

Our first analysis cycle started with a priori codes aligned with Harris's (1993) conceptualization of whiteness as a property outlined in our theoretical framework. This stage of analysis demonstrated leadership moves being made within PCSD that advanced racial justice in

name only while actively maintaining leadership as the propertied interest of white individuals. During our second round of analysis, we relied on an understanding of racial fortuity and unwilling sacrifice (Bell, 2004) to understand how marginalization continued for communities of color despite supposed equity-driven district leadership. Throughout both cycles of data analysis authors 1 and 2 constantly compared analyses of the same pieces of data to ensure shared understanding and to refine analysis codes and strategies when alignment was not present.

# Findings

White leaders in Prairie City School District engaged in race-conscious leadership practices that prioritized maintaining leadership as a propertied interest of white people over disrupting historical white supremacist practices within the district or calling their personal leadership practices into question. Through this prioritization, white leaders ensured their access to the benefits of school leadership while not substantially working towards shifting educational opportunities for youth of color. Using the propositions of whiteness as property (Harris, 1993), we demonstrate the ways white leaders upheld leadership as the property of white people while espousing a race-conscious agenda. This is significant because anger over inequities within PCSD had placed the white superintendent's possession of leadership in jeopardy.

## Maintaining Their Rights of Disposition

White leaders maintained their rights of disposition by controlling the equity agenda in two ways that ensured their dispositional rights of leadership were not questioned. First, PCSD leaders enacted equity work that remained firmly within their area of expertise and comfort to not disrupt their status as leaders of the district. Second, leaders initiated equity work that positioned the individual actions of others as the target of change as opposed to calling their personal leadership decisions and actions into question as a cause of racial inequities in the district.

### *Maintaining Expertise*

High-level leaders in PCSD positioned the new instructional framework and standards-referenced grading as the key levers in their equity agenda. As all four of the top-ranking district leaders had risen from the ranks of building principals in PCSD and were known as successful instructional leaders, these initiatives were squarely situated within their recognized areas of expertise. Furthermore, both the superintendent and associate superintendent of academics (the second highest ranking leader in the district) regularly highlighted their expertise in this area and their ability to lead the district in this type of work. It was common during professional development sessions with building-level leadership teams to hear both Jeff and Steve reference their experiences as instructional leaders in PCSD. At one point, Steve commented, "This [instructional framework] is the work. Trust me, I've done it and done it well; it makes a difference." Both leaders continued to rely on their previous work and status as experts in leading the work.

While actively maintaining their personal expertise, white district leaders also advanced the dispositional status of leadership as situated within whiteness broadly through their placement of external white leaders via the instructional framework and standards-referenced grading initiative. Through relying on external professional learning consultants who were all white, PCSD leadership further entrenched notions of leadership expertise as a dispositional right of white people. Mike noted that this was not lost on leaders of color, "yeah, people [building leaders] see that all these outside people are white. It doesn't align with what we say we're doing." Mike's comments were a common sentiment amongst the few leaders of color across PCSD.

Through their focus on maintaining the dispositional rights of leadership for whites by focusing espoused race-conscious work on areas of white leader expertise, PCSD leadership invested district time and resources in improvement efforts that failed to support district personnel in developing their capacity to meet the needs of youth of color. Further, by keeping district-level leadership practices within the realm of white expertise, district leaders ensured their dispositional status would not be questioned because they (as white leaders) never had to assume the vulnerable position of being learners while ceding expertise and leadership to individuals of color.

### Positioning Others as Needing Improvement

Connected to maintaining their expertise and avoiding needing to be learners, when white leaders at PCSD initiated improvement work beyond their expertise, they still maintained their rights of disposition by ensuring other peoples' actions were the causes of racialized outcomes. Jeff's selection of a model of cultural competence that was led by two university faculty members targeted the actions of individuals as the needed lever of change as opposed to district-wide organizational improvements that have been demonstrated to disrupt inequities present in schools (Irby, 2021). In discussing the work, Steve offered a moment of honesty about how the work was pushed down the organizational chart in a way that allowed district leadership to avoid taking responsibility for shifting their practice:

> It's not a central office expectation that we gather around in 5 departments, and we talk about policies, procedures and look through that through like culturally proficient lens and take some of our conversations and then say alright now where does this fit actually in our work, let's break that down. We don't have those kind of conversations around cultural proficiency. But yet we have asked every building to engage in this work…and so I guess to call it out, right, it feels very hypocritical in many respects.

Throughout Steve's response and the rollout of the cultural proficiency model, the responsibility and accountability fell on building leaders, which was a more racially diverse group of individuals than district leaders.

High-level white district leaders further maintained their rights of disposition related to leadership by introducing professional learning sessions on cultural competence. Through their introductions, Jeff and Steve ensured they communicated their expertise as leaders, distracted from the meaningful work through humor, and excused themselves from the learning session. Specifically, they would take the first 45-60 minutes of each three-hour session highlighting their accomplishments as district leaders, noting any shifts in district data to support their status as leaders - for example, showing data that attendance rates ticked up a small amount for students of color. Further, during these introductions, Jeff would insert funny slides into his PowerPoint decks that were completely unrelated to the work at hand, offering comments about how "we need to remember to laugh." Introductions typically ended with Steve delivering an impassioned speech calling this "the most important work we are doing." then he excused himself, Jeff, and the other high-level district leaders because they "had a pressing meeting to attend." All these moves worked to distance white district leaders from the work at hand and avoid the possibility of their expertise as leaders being called into question.

These protective moves were not lost on audience members—especially individuals of color. Oftentimes, audience members would interject questions related to the internal coherence (Forman et al., 2021) of the race-conscious improvement work in the district. These questions were typically along the lines of, "We don't see how all of this [instructional framework, standards-referenced grading, and cultural competence] fits together and is aligned?" Inevitably, Jeff would offer,

"Cultural competence is the plate that the rest of our work rests on." As individuals became unsatisfied with such a nebulous response, Steve would position the university professors leading the session as the individuals to answer that question. While this could demonstrate that white district leaders did not understand the concept of internal coherence, a more plausible explanation is that white district leaders were actively working to position others in need of improvement and maintaining their status as leaders. This plausibility is undergirded in the ways that district leaders engaged in numerous behaviors to protect their expertise and position others as in need of improvement.

These protective moves also resulted in lower-level district leaders, especially individuals of color, having to defend Jeff and Steve's leadership moves and capacity. On multiple occasions, principal coaches were pressed by building leadership teams on why the work was so focused on their actions as opposed to the work of district leaders and why higher-level district leaders seemed to avoid scrutiny under the improvement work. Principal coaches responded with statements of support for Jeff and Steve and reminded building-level leaders that they were the ones in direct contact with students. During an interview, Ben shared his frustrations with and how it positioned district leaders as above everything, "it is a hard sell sometimes, it's basically, 'you change what you're doing and let us be because we are good.'" Ben was offering insights on how white high-level district leaders maintained their rights of disposition related to school leadership and provided them continued access to the benefits of owning the property of leadership.

## Maintaining Their Status and Reputation

District leaders upheld white ownership of leadership by maintaining their status and reputation as leaders by seeking personal recognition for their equity work. Mike offered insights into this during an interview, "to some extent, the policy [district equity work] is about maintaining the status quo, to some extent, right. The powers that be and the decision-makers have their own self-serving interests." Through effective recognition seeking, white leaders ensured their status and reputation as good white leaders was upheld and that questions around white individuals' leading equity work in a predominantly of color district were never publicly debated. White leaders were able to maintain their and other white leaders' status and reputation as leaders through work internal to PCSD and external to the district.

### *Maintaining Internal Status and Reputation*

Jeff and other white leaders strategically maintained leadership as a possession of white individuals, including themselves, by securing their status as leaders within the PCSD community. For example, once youth of color developed the Teacher Code of Conduct as a mechanism to support the implementation of culturally relevant teaching practices, Jeff offered to create an opportunity for the youth to present the Code of Conduct at a school board meeting. However, Jeff made sure that he introduced the youth, the two white teachers directly supporting the youth of color, and took half of the allotted time talking about how he and other white district leaders created space for the Code of Conduct to be established and how this work "demonstrates the type of work the district is doing to support students of color." As the school board began to ask questions to students about how the Code of Conduct would be implemented, Steve subtly yet effectively took over the Q&A and deflected questions about implementation with vague statements such as, "They [the youth] will probably present this at one of your building leadership team PD sessions in the future. We want to make sure it connects with the topics of the session." At the end of the presentation, board members thanked the students and Jeff for their hard work on the Code of Conduct; interestingly, Jeff was not at a single youth leadership meeting where the Code of Conduct was created.

Jeff and Steve further maintained internal status and reputation by regularly highlighting their and other white leaders' work at all levels of district and community meetings. This often took the form of Steve highlighting his and Jeff's work while simultaneously highlighting the work of a white leader they promoted. For example, in multiple meetings with building-level leaders, Steve shared how the new focus on equity led Jeff to create new leadership positions that operated as coaches for building principals, and these new coaches were supported by three new upper-level leaders (all of whom were white). Then, Steve would create space for one of these three individuals to address the meeting and share success stories of the work. Steve would typically introduce this with something along the lines of, "Jeff invested a lot in this new model that really focused on getting support to building leaders as opposed to out-of-touch district offices. Let's hear about this new work from someone doing the work." Through this interaction, Steve was securing his and Jeff's status and reputation as leaders and ensuring that the newly created positions of principal coaches and principal coach supervisors were granted status and reputation as white leaders. Importantly, at no point did Jeff or Steve actually share how principal coaches and coach supervisors were engaged in race-conscious leadership.

### Maintaining External Status and Reputation

Beyond ensuring that leadership remained the propertied of whiteness through internally upholding white leaders' status and reputation, PCSD leaders also engaged in this work externally. This work further cemented Jeff and Steve's leadership reputation within Prairie City and PCSD and the status of white leadership within the district. Steve and Jeff primarily accomplished this through attendance and speaking engagements at national K-12 education organizations focused on improving school districts located in urban spaces. At least once per month, one or both Steve and Jeff were at a national conference where they shared about their leadership work in PCSD. Their presence at these conferences was then shared broadly in PCSD and Prairie City. Jeff often commented in meetings, "Sorry I missed the last meeting. I was at X conference, sharing the great work we are doing here…People are really excited hearing about it." Through highlighting their status and reputation at national organizations, Jeff and Steve worked to increase their hold on leadership within PCSD without needing to demonstrate actual race-conscious leadership expertise or shifts in PCSD practices; instead, speaking at a national conference became a proxy to uphold status and reputation. Also important here, at no point did Jeff and Steve bring a leader of color to any of the national conferences they attended.

### Ensuring Their Rights to Exclude

White leaders maintained leadership as a property right of whiteness by excluding others from formalized leadership roles. The exclusion was enacted in two primary ways: first, by creating new leadership positions in the district that were made available to predominantly white individuals. Second, by espousing the value of student of color leadership while ensuring that white individuals oversaw youth of color leaders. These two practices worked to entrench leadership as the property of whites within PCSD.

### Excluding through Distribution

Through their engagement in espoused race-conscious leadership, white district leaders simultaneously maintained leadership as a property right of whiteness and limited their equity work by increasing district leadership positions and excluding individuals of color from accessing those roles. As Chris noted, a large part of PCSD's equity work was to increase the number of district leaders present to support building-level leaders by creating principal coaching positions:

> In most districts, the supervisor of principals has too many schools, so they don't
> have a lot of contact, or direct contact, with central offices. What we're trying to do
> is drop the principal-supervisor ratio to provide direct support to principals.

However, nine of the 10 new leadership positions created were filled by white people. When discussing this, Steve offered the following, "We needed people with strong instructional leadership skills; we can teach the other stuff [cultural competency]. They have to be able to support instructional improvement if things are going to change." When pushed during the interview on how this practice was excluding people of color from leadership roles and whether or not the district's definition of instructional expertise was limited, Steve responded, "We don't control who has instructional expertise and we know it when we see it. Without it [instructional expertise] school cannot improve, so we are getting those people." Steve's quotes can be seen as highly exclusionary of people of color when connected to the district's investment in a culture-blind instructional framework. Knowledge of culturally relevant instructional practices was not seen as instructional leadership under the district's model of instructional improvement.

White district leaders also maintained leadership and its benefits as the property of white individuals by exclusding individuals of color from engaging as building-level leaders as part of the district's equity agenda. All building principals were asked to create a building-level leadership team (assistant principals, instructional coaches, etc.) to attend trainings related to the instructional framework and cultural competence. As with district-level leadership positions, principals were asked to prioritize instructional expertise in building their teams over expertise with cultural proficiency. The result was that the overwhelming majority of schools created leadership teams that were all white. In essence, district leaders used their espoused race-conscious work and the related need to increase instructional leadership capacity within the district as a tool to increase the number of leaders in the district and then used this process to further entrench that leadership in PCSD was the possession of white people.

### Excluding through Supervision

Leaders in PCSD maintained leadership as the property of whites by positioning white individuals as the supervisors of leaders of color. A primary reason for Jeff's focus on equity in PCSD stemmed from the school board debating if his contract should be terminated due to racialized inequities in the district—particularly a group of community members of color recently elected to the board. Leveraging a politically active group of youth of color, Jeff green-lit a student leadership initiative in the district. Jeff openly shared how he saw this group of youth as transformative for the district:

> The students have more awareness [than district personnel] and they are critical
> thinkers and problem solvers, especially related to their schools. They really get at the
> root of school issues in a way that is unquestionable and offer solutions.

However, Jeff excluded these youth from engaging in full leadership participation by supervising them with two white teachers.

While the white teachers were well-versed in critical pedagogy (Freire, 1996) and seen as social justice warriors in the district, they were also hired by Jeff when he was a building principal. Furthermore, Jeff hired Kelly as an uncertified teacher by reclassifying her position. All of this ensured that Jeff and other high-level white district leaders maintained a certain amount of control and supervision over youth of color leaders. District leaders supported the youth in developing a Teacher Code of Conduct to drive conversations about how teachers engaged with youth of color. However, they removed support and legitimacy from the Code of Conduct once it was no longer

politically advantageous for them as leaders. In this way, Jeff was quick to share leadership with youth of color tactically but equally fast to exclude youth of color from leadership and re-establish leadership as the possession of whites when that leadership failed to support his political agenda.

White district leaders recognized how youth of color leadership in the district protected their propertied interest and leadership and named how they actively took advantage of the optics of youth of color leaders. Tim, as the culture and climate lead for the district, noted:

> I think that as a district, I mean, it [youth of color leadership] gives us, it makes us look really good. I mean, without, I'm not going to hold back, though I think the district looks at that and goes, "Yeah, this, this makes us look like we got our shit together."

While having difficulty coming right out and saying it, Tim is acknowledging the district and its leadership look good to the public. This aligns with the connection between increased school board support for Jeff's renewed contract and creating a youth voice initiative. Again, once the youth of color leadership initiative served its purpose, ownership of leadership was re-established as the property of white people in PCSD.

**Preserving Their Right to Use and Enjoyment**

Finally, white leaders in PCSD leveraged the district's espoused race-conscious improvement work to maintain white individuals' right to use and enjoy leadership. While this seems natural for leaders to do, white leaders in PCSD extended white peoples' property rights of leadership through the district's race-conscious work by (1) inserting their leadership into situations where they had limited expertise and (2) relying on their engagement in equity improvement work to extend their right to use and enjoy the privileges of being a district leader. Together, these two moves solidified leadership as something to be used and enjoyed by white individuals in PCSD.

Jeff and Steve regularly inserted themselves into areas where they had limited expertise to ensure they could use and enjoy leadership. As previously mentioned, they both took substantial periods of time during externally run professional learning sessions to engage in leadership activities that were unrelated to cultural competence. Through these actions, they could use and enjoy their status of leadership while diminishing the amount of time other leaders in the district had to learn. Further, they relied on their ability to use leadership to leave these professional learning sessions early. In both situations, white high-ranking district leaders capitalized on their ability to use and enjoy leadership to negatively impact the district's race-conscious work.

District leaders' engagement in equity work provided a rationale to get their contracts renewed and preserved their ability to use and enjoy leadership within Prairie City. Neither the school board nor Jeff explicitly stated that his contract as superintendent was renewed because of this race-conscious work in the district, there were no longer discussions of not renewing his contract after Jeff initiated the espoused race-conscious work. Most notably, high-level district leaders maintained their positions over the course of the study and beyond, even though outcome measures for students of color remained surprisingly consistent across the three years of our research, with slight increases or decreases each year. Interestingly, white students saw substantial increases in their outcomes; for example, graduation rates amongst white students increased by around five percent – an interesting result that likely speaks to the colorblind improvement work related to the instructional framework and standards-referenced grading.

# Discussion

This study demonstrates how white leaders' commitments to maintain leadership as the property of white people limited their ability to enact race-conscious district improvement. By retaining their status as effective district leaders without comprising any perceived expertise, white leaders in PCSD failed to engage in the type of disruptive change (Irby, 2021) required to meaningful improve learning opportunities for youth of color.

We begin our discussion by demonstrating how the race-conscious improvement work taken up by leaders in PCSD was insufficient and unaligned with existing scholarship. As noted above, race-conscious district leadership needs to develop organizational structures that prioritize equity and strengthen organizational capacity around equity, promote an understanding of equity-centered pedagogy, align district resources towards equity goals, and communicate a clear message on the centrality of equity to the district's work (Anderson, 2022; Irby et al., 2022; Rorrer et al., 2008; Shah et al., 2022). The work led by Steve and Jeff failed to address any of these aims in deep ways. For example, PCSD leaders selected a colorblind instructional framework and standards-referenced grading not grounded in culturally relevant practices. Further, they undermined their communication about the district's race-conscious agenda by making jokes during professional learning sessions, wasting valuable time in meetings with meaningless updates, and leaving professional learning sessions. Jeff did not center race consciousness by creating new district-level leadership positions and reorganizing the district structure; instead, he established more leadership opportunities for white people. Potentially most problematic, district leaders' largest expenditure was for the instructional framework, so few new financial resources were available for the disruptive changes necessary for race-conscious improvement. Lastly, Steve and Jeff struggled to communicate how the district's cultural proficiency work connected to its broader race-conscious work, resulting in it appearing as an afterthought and violation of internal coherence (Foreman et al., 2021).

## Placing Our Findings in Broader Context

While our research was conducted in a specific place and time grounded in understandings of U.S. urban contexts (Irby, 2015), our findings also speak to global issues of race-conscious and equity-centered school leadership. Forces of oppression, whether white supremacy, colonization, or religionism, enable a group to maintain property interests in educational leadership. Maintaining ownership of educational leadership allows individuals with oppressive power to control resources and educational opportunities for historically marginalized students and limit access to positional power for members of historically marginalized groups (Salisbury, 2021; Salisbury et al., 2020). Institutional policies, practices, and norms work to conserve these property rights in ways that normalize oppressors maintaining leadership positions (Ray, 2019; Salisbury, 2020). For example, Ray (2019) highlights how whiteness in organizations legitimizes leadership structures while masking this process as a neutral organizational practice. Globally, this practice is not limited to the oppressive forces of white supremacy; all systems of power work to maintain their power in these structural and discursive ways (Khalifa, 2020). In other words, access to the property rights of leadership can be excluded based on religion, class, sexual orientation, or ethnicity.

## Whiteness as Property as a Sensemaking Tool

There are essential points to discuss within this research—were leaders in PCSD acting in typical self-interest? Or were PCSD leaders skilled in protecting the broader rights of white people to own school leadership? While there is no definitive way to answer these questions, we argue the latter. When looking across the leadership moves that Jeff and Steve made, the moves overwhelmingly extended beyond maintaining their personal interest in leadership. Instead, the

moves actively maintained district leadership as the possession of white people. For example, when new district leadership positions were created, white people disproportionately filled those positions. The same with the hiring of external experts and the placement of teacher-leaders to run the youth leadership program. In essence, when allowed to champion race-conscious improvement in ways that could de-couple leadership as a possession of whiteness and still maintain their personal investment in leadership, Jeff and Steve did not take the opportunity.

Whiteness as property and its propositions of property (Harris, 1993) offers a meaningful model to further understand how and why white district leaders' espoused race-conscious improvements failed to engage in disruptive improvement actions while working to maintain district leadership as the exclusive property of white people. Specifically, the right of disposition, the absolute right to exclude, the right to use and enjoyment, and reputation and status. Whiteness as property has been used in research on leadership to understand how white leaders resist sharing leadership with youth of color (Salisbury et al., 2021; Sheth & Salisbury, 2022), maintain a sense of comfort in their equity work (Radd & Grossland, 2019), and create links between educational opportunities and white students (Salisbury, 2019). Our research adds to the growing body of scholarship by providing specific examples of how white leaders maintain their propertied interest in leadership while being recognized as equity-minded leaders. It is important to note that our argument is not about intentionality on the part of white leaders; rather, it is about how white supremacy manifests in leadership work to maintain the inequitable distribution of resources.

Through maintaining their expertise and positioning other people in the district as needing improvement, white district leaders upheld their rights to disposition related to leadership. It is well-documented that leading race-conscious improvement requires humility and vulnerability (Irby, 2021; Theoharis & Haddix, 2011). However, PCSD leaders resisted taking on this vulnerability and instead found ways to ensure their expertise remained. While this likely undermined the race-conscious work in the district, it ensured that Steve and Jeff sustained their status as experts and knowers. Additionally, maintaining their rights to disposition minimized school board members, community members, and families from questioning the ability of a predominately white leadership team to lead race-conscious work. These actions further cemented district leadership in PCSD as the property of white individuals, which allowed white people to maintain the property benefits of district leadership.

Steve and Jeff nurtured their internal and external reputation and status to maintain their status and reputation as leaders. By highlighting small shifts in outcomes for students of color or calling attention to their inclusion in national conferences, they actively elevated their reputation as race-conscious leaders in the Prairie City community, putting them above reproach. More importantly, it put their leadership decisions related to equity above reproach. Understanding the power of status and reputation helps us to comprehend why a colorblind instructional framework could be championed as race-conscious work throughout the district that serves a student population that is predominately of color. Through highlighting their national status as race-conscious leaders and minor shifts in student outcomes—while minimizing the large gains by white students—Jeff and Steve deepened the status and reputation of white district leaders in PCSD, further bonding leadership as the property of white people within the district.

White leaders in PCSD strategically engaged their right to exclude others from leadership as a tool to maintain their control over access to leadership. First, they included students of color as leaders as a mechanism to maintain their personal control over leadership, then youth of color leaders stopped serving a purpose Steve and Jeff found a way to exclude youth of color. In many ways, this was doubly harmful because it exploited youth of color as a tool to uphold the whiteness of leadership. Additionally, white district leaders created new leadership positions throughout the district but defined the needed skills for those leadership positions as skills that white individuals in

the district possessed. This act of exclusion simultaneously barred people of color from leadership and increased access to the property of leadership for white people in the district. Through these acts of exclusion, white leaders ensured that their leadership actions would not be questioned through the lenses of leaders of color and cemented the future status of district leadership as the property of whites by creating a white pipeline of future high-ranking district leaders.

Finally, white leaders in PCSD found ways to ensure their rights to use and enjoy the benefits of leadership in ways to maintain district-level leadership as the property right of white people. Jeff and Steve inserted themselves into leadership situations where they had limited expertise to continue their existing enjoyment of leadership. They also relied on their shallow race-conscious work to maintain their future rights to use and enjoy leadership by having their contracts renewed. As mentioned above, they were both championed for doing equity work in the district, even though that work failed to substantially shift learning outcomes or opportunities for youth of color.

Broadly speaking, white district leaders in PCSD were able to leverage their existing property rights to school leadership to solidify the right of white people to own district leadership and its related benefits (i.e., pay and status). The end result was that students of color attending PCSD continued to receive inequitable educational opportunities disguised as race-conscious improvement. Students of color were forced to involuntarily sacrifice (Salisbury, 2020) their right to a high-quality education to allow white leaders to maintain control of their property. Unfortunately, we all know the long-term consequence of this situation is the concretization of racist views about students and families of color being disinvested and uninterested in learning as opposed to a recognition that white individuals with positional power failed to disrupt white supremacist systems.

## What Could Have Been Different?

While this research might offer a bleak view of the enactment of race-conscious improvement in an urban school district, we also feel it offers meaningful implications for future work within race-conscious improvement and any improvement efforts attempting to disrupt structural inequities present within educational organizations. A simple yet meaningful solution emerges based on notions of racial fortuity (Bell, 2004). Bell (2004) argues that there are two sides to the coin of racial fortuity: Interest convergence and the involuntary sacrifices of communities of color. Interest convergence, which is regularly used in educational research, states that the benefits of racial justice work will stop for communities of color once white people no longer benefit from that same work (i.e., affirmative action). According to Bell, involuntary sacrifice refers to what happens when communities of color are not present at the table when issues of inequity are addressed. In those instances, Bell argues that communities of color are forced to sacrifice because the proposed solution will offer no meaningful benefit for communities of color. For example, the Emancipation Proclamation was conceived and written exclusively by white people as a mechanism to win the Civil War, so it freed enslaved African Americans in the South but not the North.

Drawing on understandings Bell's (2004) notion of involuntary sacrifice and its relation to the absence of people of color at the table, it is easy to see how white leaders in PCSD advanced equity work that deepened their ownership of leadership and failed to shift opportunities for youth of color radically. What would it have looked like for Jeff and the rest of PCSD leaders to significantly engage students of color, families of color, communities of color, experts of color, and leaders of color in their equity planning and implementation? Our guess is that the work would have been more radical and disruptive in nature and may not have required youth of color to continue the long history of sacrificing equitable learning opportunities.

# Conclusion

We would be remiss if we did not bring to the fore the real-world implications of the work done in PCSD. Students of color in the district were denied equitable, culturally relevant learning opportunities because white district leaders centered reserving leadership as white propertied interest over disrupting existing district policies and practices that were white supremacist. Further, potential leaders of color were denied access to leadership opportunities that would have promoted the "influential presence of Black and Brown voices" necessary for structural change (Irby, 2021). It is not relevant to the argument if white leaders were acting from a place of intentionality or misguided understandings of race-conscious improvement; instead, it is essential that these leaders' attempts at district improvement worked to reify the status quo of leadership being owned by dominantly situated people and that equity improvement "in name only" is enough to show districts are working to support historically marginalized students and communities.

Outside of a U.S. context, our research still holds promise for understanding how to move towards more equitable educational spaces. While our study was focused on white supremacy in an urban U.S. context, the underlying principles of our study hold in other spaces. There is overwhelming evidence that systems of oppression work in self-sustaining ways to strengthen themselves and use bullying forces to dismiss attempts at disruption (Leonardo, 2015). As such, in a context where the goal is to disrupt oppression related to ethnicity or religion, educational leaders, policymakers, and scholars need to be cognizant of how the given system of oppression is operating in structural, dialogic, and normalizing ways to maintain the status quo of inequity.

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