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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

What's Good?: A Qualitative Examination of Effective Schools for Black Students'

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in Education

by

Jaleel Rashaad Bakari Howard

2025

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2025

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

What's Good?: A Qualitative Examination of Effective Schools for Black Students'

by

Jaleel Rashaad Bakari Howard

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2025

Professor John S. Rogers, Co-Chair

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### **Abstract**

Educational literature provides extensive evidence on the multitude of ways that schools inflict harm upon Black students, resulting in persistent disparities and inequitable outcomes (Annamma et al., 2019; Dumas, 2018; Love, 2023; Watson & Marie, 2022). While this body of research is crucial for identifying harmful practices and policies that disproportionately marginalize Black students, a focus on failure alone does not offer a clear pathway for supporting Black student achievement. To further our understanding of how to enhance academic achievement for Black students, this dissertation adopted an anti-deficit approach to ascertain educational practices that contribute to Black student success, offering a grounded theory for constructing effective schools for Black students. Through a multi-stakeholder qualitative methodological design this study, examined Black student success at two high-performing schools with a substantial Black student population. The stakeholders included in this research were Black students, Black caregivers, teachers, school leaders, and educational researchers. Data collection involved focus groups, interviews, and observations, providing a robust

perspective on the strategies and practices that support the success of Black Students. Grounded theory methodology informed both data collection and analysis, enabling the identification of key factors contributing to Black student success and the exploration of diverse conceptualizations of student success. The findings of this study emphasize the importance of culturally responsive practices, a strong school culture, high expectations, and strong school-caregiver-community relationships in fostering Black student success. The findings also revealed a pluralistic and complex understanding of Black student success that extends beyond traditional academic metrics and is inextricably tied to Black folks' social position within the United States. The insights generated from this research have significant implications for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners seeking to improve educational experiences for Black students. By centering Black student success, this dissertation provides an instructive guide for creating equitable and effective educational environments for Black students that can be adapted and replicated in other contexts.

The dissertation of Jaleel Rashaad Bakari Howard is approved.

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University of California, Los Angeles

2025

## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my amazing daughters, Jaye and Kamryn. The world is your canvas, and I cannot wait to see the beautiful pictures you paint.

To all the incredible students I've encountered over the last decade who have made me the educator and researcher I am today.

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much as they talk about *you*—the person you are and the impact you’ve had on their lives and careers. People often ask what it’s like going to UCLA or being in a field where my father looms so large, and it fills me with pride. You’re not only a highly accomplished person, but someone who walks into the ivory tower the same way you do at home. I’m proud to be part of your legacy, and I am forever grateful for these six years. I truly admire your ability to juggle all you do professionally and still be a present and engaged father, son, husband and more.

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**Howard, J.R.** So now what? Examining school leaders' responses to the movement for Black lives. Manuscript for preparation for submission to *Journal of School Leadership*

**Howard, J.R.** "We want to be seen, not surveilled": Black students telling their side of the story. Manuscript for preparation for submission to *Education in Education and Society*.

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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

The educational outcomes of Black<sup>1</sup> students have been amongst the most troubling trends in public education for more than five decades. Although a substantial body of research is focused on supporting the academic achievement of Black students (Banks, 1975; Gay, 1994; Howard, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Love, 2019; Nasir, 2011; Noguera, 2003), there remains a considerable gap in translation between research and practice to improve outcomes. This is evident in the fact that Black students are consistently found at the bottom of virtually every statistical measure of wellbeing and educational performance (NCES, 2019). One plausible explanation behind the lack of academic progress for Black students is that within educational research, we have more evidence of what subverts the academic potential of Black students than what fosters academic thriving for Black students.

In my experiences working in schools as a teacher and researcher, I have found that many educators are well aware of educational practices and policies that inordinately harm Black students, but rarely do educators feel equipped with the requisite knowledge and skills to disrupt these inequities. Leading educational researchers such as Pedro Noguera and Gloria Ladson-Billings have argued that the scarcity of improvement for Black students in K-12 schools is a byproduct of research that is hyper focused on identifying problems rather than providing actionable solutions for addressing educational disparities affecting Black students (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Noguera, 2003; Noguera, 2009). My dissertation is a multi-stakeholder qualitative exploration of what happens in schools where Black students succeed. A secondary

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<sup>1</sup> The term "Black" is used to denote a racial category that reflects shared historical and social experiences shaped by systemic racialization. It encompasses individuals of the African diaspora, extending beyond African Americans to include those of African descent globally.

aim of my research is to explore varied constructs of student success, and the extent to which Blackness impacts how student success is achieved and conceptualized by different stakeholders.

My research approach is grounded in the belief that in order for researchers to provide impactful solutions for fostering Black student achievement, we need to study schools that are already producing countertrends in Black student achievement. In fields outside of education, researchers frequently study organizations with a proven track record of high efficacy to identify key structures and approaches that contribute to success. For instance, economists often conduct extensive research on companies like Apple or Google to explore how factors such as management practices and institutional design contribute to economic prosperity for these organizations (Galloway, 2017). Similarly, the purpose of investigating the schools in my study is to identify the practices, policies, and procedures commonly found in schools with a demonstrated record of producing success for Black students.

This dissertation is an in-depth analysis of two schools that, according to several data sources, are highly effective in educating Black students. In a departure from dominant literature on school improvement, my research engaged the perspectives of key stakeholders often absent from educational research. For the purpose of my research, a stakeholder is defined as an individual that has a vested interest in the outcomes of an organization (McGrath & Whitty, 2017). Stakeholders have varied impact on organizations based on their positionality, with some having a direct influence on daily practices while others may have an indirect influence on the organization. Nevertheless, the support and engagement of all stakeholders remains a critical factor in organizational success. The stakeholders outlined in this research are school personnel

(i.e., teachers, administrators, and principals), Black caregivers<sup>2</sup>, Black students, and educational researchers who study Black students. Schools are complex organizations that are impacted by the actions of numerous actors; therefore, it is imperative to expand our analysis beyond educators and students. Freeman (1984) explains that when studying the functioning of any organization, it is imperative to pay attention to all stakeholders because they, “influence the wellbeing of an organization or the achievement of its objectives” (p.241). In theory, schools in the United States share the objective of supporting the academic and holistic growth of their student body; they achieve these goals, however, to varying degrees. My dissertation study explored why some schools succeed in reaching their objectives, particularly with Black students, while many schools across the country continue to fall short. The primary unit of analysis in my study is schools, but since schools are comprised of people, I investigated social dynamics within the school sites as well as the values and beliefs of stakeholders to better understand how Black student success is actualized.

Success is frequently used as a term of universal meaning within education. One goal of my study was to complexify how success is understood for Black students. This study analyzed whether schools that are effective in educating Black students conceptualize student success in ways that are inclusive and reflective of the beliefs and experiences of Black students and their families. I believe it is critical to examine conceptions of student success because schools’ structures and daily practices are designed according to our notions of student success.

Given that Black folks have historically had unique and varied experiences with education in the United States, it is important to examine whether traditional notions of success are inclusive of

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<sup>2</sup> The term "caregiver" refers to an individual who provides primary care and support to a child, functioning in a role similar to that of a parent. For the purposes of this document, "caregiver" will be used interchangeably with "parent" to encompass biological parents, legal guardians, and other individuals who fulfill this caregiving role.

Black students' views and perspectives. Much of the education literature related to student success does not explore varied constructs of success, particularly how it may vary for racialized groups. My dissertation research is anchored in studying how ideals of Black student success shape organizational structure and the subsequent impact on Black students' academic achievement.

### **Problem Statement**

It is imperative to conduct research that challenges prevailing beliefs and assumptions about Black students because as a field, we have yet to find replicable solutions for improving Black students' educational experiences and outcomes. The academic outcomes of Black students suggest that public schools in the United States are grossly ineffective in educating Black students. According to recent data, of the nearly 8 million Black students in public schools today, over 80% lack grade-level proficiency in mathematics and literacy (NAEP, 2019; NCES, 2024). The paucity of high academic achievement for Black students points to the immediate need for innovative research approaches that yield new insights into how schools can better serve Black students. I argue that researchers and practitioners must analyze schools and educators who are currently and effectively educating Black students so we can learn from them and find ways to replicate best practices.

I have specifically centered this work on Black students because U.S. public schools have never adequately served Black children (Harper, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2016). Since the arrival of Black bodies on what is now North American soil in 1619, Black folks have faced inequitable access to high quality education in comparison to their White counterparts (Anderson, 1988; Du Bois, 1903; Dumas & ross, 2016; Hahn, 2003). Even after emancipation and the emergence of public school systems in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, public schools have remained a tool of social

stratification that has inordinately harmed Black communities (Spring, 2016). A substantial body of literature demonstrates the multitude of ways that United States public schools perpetuate harm against Black students (Harper, 2021; Love, 2023; Morris, 2016; Warren & Coles, 2020; Watson & Marie, 2022). Black students have historically and remain amongst those most likely to attend racially segregated, underfunded, and under-resourced schools (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Orfield & Jarvie, 2020). Research across numerous decades has revealed that Black students are overrepresented in school discipline data, and lag behind their White peers in nearly all indicators of academic achievement, ranging from placement in gifted and advanced courses to standardized testing results (Annamma et al., 2019; Ford, 1998; Gay, 1994; Noguera, 2009; Spencer & Ullucci, 2022). The structural inequities and social advantages that have consistently befallen Black students necessitate the cultivation of school environments that disrupt prevailing patterns of educational disservice and address both the academic and non-academic needs of Black students. This raises important questions: What do these school spaces look like, feel like, and sound like? How are they actively disrupting patterns of harm and failure? What unique practices and approaches do they employ to nurture Black student success in ways that others do not? Given that Black students are among the most marginalized populations in K-12 education, efforts to improve conditions for them have the potential to transform schools in ways that benefit all students. When we rethink how schools serve their most vulnerable populations, we lay the groundwork for equitable and effective practices that uplift entire school communities.

Building on this perspective, this research also seeks to reexamine problematize the notion that Black student success is solely measured by academic proficiency. Within contemporary educational research, student success is often equated with academic proficiency,

with a narrow focus on grades and standardized achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2010). This myopic perspective dominates not only K-12 literature but also educational practice, leaving little room to examine the complexity and multifaceted nature of success. By treating success as a universally understood, we develop policies and practices based on an ideal that may hold distinct meanings for different groups. I argue that one reason for the persistent lack of academic success for Black students, in the traditional sense, is that conventional definitions of success do not align with Black communities' understandings of what it means for students to succeed. This misalignment highlights a critical issue: we are constructing schools around ideals that fail to reflect the values, priorities, and lived realities of Black students and their communities.

If Black students and their families envision success in ways that differ from the mainstream narrative, then our schools must be reimagined to reflect those unique aspirations. To do so, we need to interrogate the underlying assumptions about success and intentionally design school environments that are culturally responsive, inclusive, and centered on the specific needs and goals of Black students. Historically, the purpose of education has been markedly differently for Black folks and I believe that has led to different notions of student success for Black individuals that are more directly tied to self-determination and communal uplift (Hilliard, 1995; Perry & Steele, 2004; Rickford, 2015). The following excerpt from James Anderson's (1988) seminal work *The Education of Blacks in the South*, explains how Black educators understood the purpose of education for Black folks early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the impact it had on their practices. He states that:

the prevailing philosophies of Black education and the subjects taught in Black schools were not geared to reproduce the caste distinctions... Rather it reflected their belief that education could help raise the freed people to an appreciation of their historic responsibility to develop a better society and that any significant reorganization of the southern political economy was indissolubly linked to their education in the principles, duties, and obligation appropriate to a democratic social order. (p. 28)

Anderson makes it clear: Black educators understood that Black students experienced fundamentally different reality than other students and therefore needed an education that was responsive to that reality. Measuring Black student success based on academic proficiency and solely focusing on content mastery would further the reproduction of inequality; Black students needed the tools to be change agents capable of redefining what it meant to be Black in the United States. Anderson recounts how these early architects of Black education implored sociopolitical consciousness that Gloria Ladson Billings (1995) discusses in her work, which is essential for marginalized student groups to help them fight their own oppression outside of the classroom. Narratives such as these serve as some of the earliest examples of highly effective schools for Black students. There remains an urgent need to study how these practices, cultural alignment, and engagement styles with Black students and Black communities manifest within our current context.

The purpose of this study was to conduct an examination of what happens in schools where Black students are succeeding in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I studied two K-12 schools with a substantial Black student population that have demonstrated proficiency in educating Black students, to explore how school spaces can be constructed to enhance the success of Black students. While the schools in this study are not without flaws, the focus of this research is not on identifying shortcomings but rather on contributing to the field's understanding of how schools can better serve Black students. The primary objective of my research was to develop a grounded theory on effective schools for Black students that nuances how success is distinctly conceptualized and actualized for Black students.

For decades, higher education literature has documented the structures and practices of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) toward understanding how to better serve



Black students enrolled at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) (Allen, 1992; Arroyo & Gasman, 2014). I propose that this same logic model be applied to K-12 schools—namely, studying K-12 schools with a substantial Black student population and educators that are effective in educating Black students to provide insights into educational approaches that can be applied in other schools to support Black student achievement. This study addressed the following questions:

**Q1.** How do different “stakeholders” of schools “deemed” successful for Black students conceive of success for Black students?

**Q2.** What are the some of the essential characteristics, practices, and policies that are most present in schools that effectively educate Black students?

## **Background**

Though public schools have a well-established history of underserving Black students, a host of educational literature and research has explored what works for Black students in K-12 schools. Historians such as Vanessa Siddle-Walker (1996) and James Anderson (1988) have done foundational work to help researchers and practitioners understand the development of effective schools for Black students in the Jim Crow South at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Despite inadequate funding from the state and menial—often hand-me-down—resources from White schools, Black students excelled academically due to the familial nature of schooling, customized learning environments, and a cadre of dedicated educators (Anderson, 1988; Givens, 2021; Moss, 2010; Randolph & L, 2012; V. S. Walker, 1996). In the following excerpt, Walker (1996) details how educators tailored their curriculum and academic offerings to be sensitive to the needs of the students they served:

Rather than being add-ons to the curriculum, these activities [extra-curriculars] were manifestations of the professional beliefs of the principal and teachers about what had to be central to the curriculum if the needs of children were to be met. As such, they were

not a mere mirroring of the activities of other schools; instead, they reflected the faculty's commitment to student development in a variety of areas. (Walker, 1995, p.10)

Educators considered extra-curriculars essential for Black students in the segregated, rural south because they helped build student self-esteem, provided exposure to worlds often hidden to poor Black children, and enabled students to participate in leadership roles. In their work, Walker (1996) and Anderson (1988) both empathize how educators acted as what Judith Kleinfeld (1975) would label “warm demanders.” Kleinfeld developed the term warm demanders to describe effective teachers of Indigenous students in Alaska. These teachers held students to high academic expectations while simultaneously providing a sense of care and support that allowed their students to succeed. The theme of educators as extensions of the family is prevalent in nearly all accounts of early Black school architects in the segregated South. These educators consistently demanded more from their students, recognizing that, within the context of restricted opportunities and pervasive anti-Black racism, it would require exceptional resilience and effort for these students to succeed. (Givens, 2021; Ware, 2006). Educators were a part of the community and developed meaningful connections with students and families that allowed them to better understand ways to reach and teach students. This information about students was then utilized to construct pedagogical practices and school-wide structures conducive to the success of Black children. The excerpt below explains teacher rationale behind their educational practices:

This was an institutional way of caring and implementing the school philosophy. The philosophy was to prepare the student to go back into the community and be an effective citizen. The activity club was part of this. This did a remarkable thing for the students. It develop[ed] self-esteem, who I am, why I'm here and where am I going. (Walker, 1996, p.108)

Adjusting school practices and policies to meet student needs kept students engaged in the classroom and prepared them for a future beyond school. The key to Black academic

achievement at this time was not merely having staff who were racially reflective of students, but who had a willingness to transform and adapt practices to create an environment conducive to Black students' success.

Since the passing of *Brown v. Board*, millions of Black students across the country have attended schools with little to no consideration of the beliefs and values of the Black community, ultimately generating a deleterious effect on Black student achievement. For much of the 1960s, educational research relied heavily on cultural pathology explanations for Black students' academic deficiencies (Ladson-Billings, 2016). These researchers often referred to Black children as "culturally deprived" and suggested that Black students and other students of color needed specialized learning environments. Cultural deficit researchers also suggested that effective schools for disadvantaged children needed to impart "cultural values" that were considered important for student success (Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966; Hess & Shipman, 1965). These conceptions of effective schools for Black students were shrouded in anti-Blackness and still impact the educational experiences of Black students today.

Efforts to support Black student success in K-12 education have varied widely, reflecting the complexity of addressing educational inequities. Foundational research in the 1990s by scholars like Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994), Lisa Delpit (1995), James Banks (1993), and Geneva Gay (1994) emphasized culturally responsive teaching and pedagogy as critical tools. Ladson-Billings' *Dreamkeepers* highlighted the role of culturally relevant practices in empowering students intellectually, socially, and politically by centering cultural referents in teaching and learning. Similarly, Gay (1994) expanded these ideas to argue for cultural synchronization in education, emphasizing the need for educators to build meaningful relationships with students and integrate their lived experiences into instruction. These

approaches demonstrate that successful teaching for Black students often requires tailoring pedagogy and curriculum to reflect their identities and cultural contexts.

Beyond classroom practices, research also points to the critical role of leadership in fostering environments conducive to Black student success. Culturally responsive leadership, as described by Khalifa (2018), involves creating inclusive school climates that affirm the identities and belonging of all students, particularly those from marginalized groups. Leaders play a vital role in ensuring that school policies, resources, and staff development align with the needs of their students. Scholars such as Dantley and Tillman (2006) and Milner (2023) have shown that school leaders who embrace equity-focused practices can cultivate organizational structures that address systemic inequities and opportunity gaps. This leadership is essential for translating culturally responsive teaching into broader schoolwide practices that impact all aspects of students' educational experiences.

At a macro level, frameworks like Milner's (2020) opportunity gap model emphasize the systemic factors that hinder Black students' access to quality education. Milner argues that opportunity gaps, rooted in race and socioeconomic disparities, shape access to resources and opportunities critical for success. Addressing these gaps requires a whole-school approach that includes examining organizational structures, policies, and community relationships. Researchers such as Na'ilah Nasir (2011) have further shown that integrating culturally relevant content, such as games or community-based knowledge, can enhance learning and engagement for Black students. These findings underscore that achieving success for Black students necessitates multifaceted efforts—ranging from curriculum and pedagogy to leadership and institutional transformation.

The prior paragraphs illustrate that while there are a variety of conceptions in the field regarding the creation of effective school environments for Black students, few studies provide a comprehensive, holistic analysis of what truly works from multi-stakeholder perspectives. Furthermore, there is a dearth of educational research on school efficacy for Black students that includes the voices of Black students and their families. By including insights from all stakeholders, this research aims to provide a more expansive conception of effective schools for Black students that considers the beliefs and values of Black people. The aforementioned research has led to a myriad of changes in K-12 school policies, curriculum development, and educator training. Yet this knowledge has led to little improvement in educational outcomes for Black students. I am not arguing that this past scholarship was insufficient, but rather that we still struggle to apply the findings derived from this research into practice. Hence, there is a need to study these practices in contemporary school settings and understand their impact from varied vantage points.

Central to addressing this gap is an acknowledgment and interrogation of the pervasiveness of anti-Blackness in K-12 schools and strategies to disrupt it. Anti-Blackness is a global phenomenon that causes harm to those racialized as Black in incalculable ways in all aspects of life (Dumas, 2016; C. Warren & Coles, 2020). The prevalence of anti-Blackness in U.S. public schools is a growing area of research as scholars continue to probe into its many manifestations within school spaces (Love, 2019; Spencer & Ullucci, 2022). Anti-Blackness is defined as, “the socially constructed rendering of Black bodies as inhuman, disposable, and inherently problematic, endures in the organizational arrangement and cultural ethos of American social institutions, including her K-12 schools, colleges, and universities” (Warren & Coles, 2020, p.383). I understand anti-Blackness as an endemic social phenomenon within the

United States that can never be wholly eliminated (ross, 2020). However, inspired by recent theoretical scholarship from researchers such as Diamond and Gomez ( 2023), my research explored empirically backed approaches for addressing and mitigating anti-Blackness within K-12 schools.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine practices, policies, and approaches for supporting Black student achievement that are directly drawn from schools that are effective in educating Black students. Because the findings of this research are derived from specific contexts, not all approaches utilized by these schools will be replicable or yield the same outcomes for Black students. The strategies examined in this research, however, will provide insights that can be adapted to different contexts to improve Black students' educational outcomes.

This study also sought to disrupt the persistent narrative of failing Black students by drawing on strategies that are currently leading to Black student achievement. The broader goal of this dissertation was to develop a grounded theory on effective school for Black students that incorporates the perspectives of key stakeholders in the education of Black students. Building upon past scholarship from researchers such as Siddle-Walker (1996), Ladson-Billings (1992), and Rickford (2015), this study sought to provide a 21<sup>st</sup> century examination of good schools for Black students. While Ladson-Billings focuses more on micro-level classroom practices, Walker focuses on macrolevel school structures, and Rickford examines Afrocentric practices within independent schools, this study attempted to present a schoolwide exploration of what factors contribute to school environments that enhance the achievement, betterment, and wellness of Black children. It was beyond the scope of this study to examine all school policies and

practices; therefore, I specifically examined in-school policies, leadership practices, classroom instruction, and schoolwide culture.

I intentionally focused on traditional public schools because there is a commonly held belief that any schools that are engaging in innovative and effective approaches for low-income children are charter or private schools (Buckley & Schneider, 2009). To be clear, I am not anti-charter school; I am a former charter schoolteacher. Yet, because most Black children in the United States attend traditional public schools, I believe it is imperative to uplift what is still academically possible for Black students in standard K-12 spaces.

### **Study Significance**

The United States is an increasingly diverse nation. According to Pew Research Center, the 2018-2019 school year was the first time White students did not comprise the majority of students enrolled in K-12 schools (PEW Research Center, 2021). Therefore, educators' ability to effectively educate diverse student groups is imperative for the success of our country's educational future. This study is significant because it is intended to provide insights into how school personnel can adapt practices and policies to support historically marginalized students in the classroom and throughout the school campus. Though this study centers Black students, I believe the findings derived from this research provide an instructive guide that can be adapted to meet the needs of other marginalized groups.

A study of this nature is especially pressing because of the uniquely tumultuous times Black students are currently experiencing. The election of Donald Trump in 2016 increased social, political, and institutional hostility toward minoritized groups (Rogers et al., 2017), and anti-Black hate crimes are rising at an alarming rate (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2024). Schools have not been able to avoid this cultural milieu and have become increasingly inhospitable spaces for

Black students. Across the nation we have witnessed how some White parents and Republican politicians alike have disrupted board meetings and even harassed educators, demanding that the curriculum in question not make White students “feel bad” or guilty about their forefathers (Johnson & Harper, 2024). These antics have resulted in changes in curriculum, banning of books, and, in some cases, even the passing of policy that prohibits students from learning history (Pollock et al, 2022). This psychological protection of White students has led to the increased marginalization of non-White students, particularly Black students, by increasing the erasure of Black life in instructional materials.

With increased public scrutiny of what is being taught in schools and how dollars are allocated to support the needs of historically disadvantaged groups, researchers and practitioners need to understand how educators are navigating these dynamics to ensure the safety and inclusion of Black students. There is much to do about protecting White children and appeasing White caregivers, but the question must be posed: What about Black students and the desires of Black caregivers? Who is concerned about the safety of Black students in the creation of curriculum and instructional materials? Answers to these questions are paramount for developing effective schools for Black students. A contemporary study on effective schools for Black students must also reckon with the growing diversity of Blackness within the United States. According to recent data of student demographics in the United States, nearly one in five Black people in the U.S. are immigrants or children of Black immigrants (Pew Research, 2019), meaning that we have an increasing number of non-African American Black students enrolled in U.S. public schools. Few studies have investigated how schools are attending to the needs of a diverse Black student population. Ukpokodu (2018) highlights how monolithic views of our Black student population often render non-African-American Black students invisible, leading to their needs being



overlooked. This invisibility results in unseen harm and erasure, as the unique experiences and challenges of immigrant Black students go unaddressed.

The safety and wellness of Black children is an urgent topic to investigate. Suicide rates, as well as depression rates, among Black adolescents have increased steadily throughout the past 20 years (Hardwick, 2021). Research demonstrates that factors such as racism, discrimination, and viral videos of Black folks being murdered and/or brutalized negatively affect the mental wellness of Black children (Cooper et al., 2008; Howard et al., 2019; Tynes et al., 2019). Moreover, the disproportionate number of COVID-related deaths in the Black community has left thousands of Black children across the country grieving (Marron, 2021). There is a wealth of literature related to the harm schools inflict upon Black students, but little related to how schools can function as healing spaces for Black students. Education scholar Shawn Ginwright (2021, 2022) has done critical work on student healing, but there is a need to continue to build on this body of work. Seeing that research consistently shows that Black students have inordinate exposure to trauma (Wamser-Nanney et al., 2021), effective schools for Black students must be spaces where Black students feel safe, seen, heard, and—where they can if necessary— heal. The mental health implications of this work increase its urgency and significance.

My research is unapologetic in that it positions Black students as highly capable learners who bring valuable, yet often delegitimized, knowledge to the learning environment. Traditional discourses on Black student achievement have placed the onus on Black children for their lack of achievement while granting little attention to ecological factors that influence Black student experiences and outcomes. An underlying message behind many of the prevailing approaches for supporting Black student achievement is “fixing” Black students (Duckworth, 2016; Duckworth et al., 2014), as opposed to disrupting and fixing schooling practices and structures that lead to

the academic failing of Black students. This dissertation challenges deficit-based ideals and narratives around Black students in school by demonstrating the possibilities that exist for Black students when schools are appropriately structured for Black students' needs. This research has implications for teacher education programs as well as educational leadership program. With the increasing diversity of public-school students in the United States, it is imperative that educators become and remain equipped with tools to effectively educate students of diverse cultural backgrounds.

### **Positionality**

I come to this research as a Black man who is a former educator of Black students. My membership in the population that I am researching may raise questions of objectivity that impact my ability to conduct rigorous, morally sound research. I recognize the influence that my insider perspective has on research (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), but I argue that my membership and internal knowledge of Black folks proved to be assets in my study. Tillman (2004) posits that cultural knowledge is integral to study because it allows the researcher to correctly interpret and validate experience. My membership within the Black community and experiences with Black students provides me with a wealth of cultural knowledge that was valuable in the interpretation of my data.

I am also a former middle school teacher, so when examining issues related to education and teaching in particular, my understandings are largely shaped by my experiences as a practitioner and a researcher. Having taught at an under-resourced school located in a densely populated and predominately Black and Brown community, I saw firsthand how far off education is from becoming any kind of equalizer. I observed how schools function as a vehicle for social stratification, perpetuating power dynamics that allow historically dominant groups in

the United States to retain their influence, while Black people and other marginalized groups are relegated to an inferior societal status. This research was inspired by a desire to develop a robust understanding of what must occur in schools in order for Black students to thrive.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **Literature Review Overview**

**Q1.** What are the some of the essential characteristics, practices, and policies that are most present in schools that effectively educate Black students?

**Q2.** How do different “stakeholders” of schools “deemed” successful for Black students conceive of success for Black students?

In this chapter I examine pertinent literature that informs this study. I begin by reviewing the relevant literature on the purpose of K-12 public education in the United States, demonstrating its fluidity over time and illustrating how evolving understandings of the purpose of education influences beliefs about what constitutes an effective school and a successful student. Because this study centers Black students, I also examine research that explicitly conveys varied understandings of success for Black students, and empirically grounded

approaches for fostering Black student success. My analysis of the literature details the role White supremacy has played in establishing our contemporary conceptions of effective schools and student success. I aim to highlight how education has historically and contemporarily served a different purpose in the lives of those racialized as Black. Consequently, Black folks' conceptions of student success and effective schools are markedly different from those of non-Black individuals. Finally, my literature review illustrates that while numerous researchers have offered valuable recommendations for improving schools for Black students and enhancing Black student success, there remains a notable gap in translating these theoretical insights into practical applications within the educational field.

The literature review closes with an explanation of the theoretical approaches guiding this study. First, Shaun Harper's anti-deficit achievement framework (ADAF) guides my analytical lens and informs the development of instruments utilized in this research. Secondly, rounded theory methodology guides the data collection and analysis portion of this research with the aim of developing a grounded theory on effective schools for Black students, that accounts for varied perspectives on Black student success. Further elaboration on these theoretical approaches and the previous ways other scholars have utilized them is included in the closing.

### **Early Conceptions of the Purpose of School and School Efficacy**

An exploration of what it has historically meant for a student to be successful and what constitutes an effective school must begin with an interrogation of the purpose of public education in the United States. I believe that our understanding of what constitutes an effective school or successful student is primarily based on how we view the purpose of education. Throughout United States history, the role and purpose of public schools has varied and evolved over time (Kober & Rentner, 2020; Noguera, 2003; Zimmerman, 2022). Before the mid-19<sup>th</sup>

century, schooling in the U.S. lacked a comprehensive structure, and was a privilege primarily provided to wealthy White children (Goldin, 1999; Spring, 2016). At this time, the purpose of education was to ensure the future of democracy in the U.S. (Labaree, 2018). The early architects of U.S. society believed that competency was key for the development of a thriving society; consequently, the government needed to ensure that a segment of the population was educated enough to make sound decisions regarding political and social life (Jefferson, 1853). Shortly after the American Revolution, prominent figures like John Adams and other early leaders began to advocate for the establishment of a more structured and cohesive system of publicly funded education.

Decades later, in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century the Common Schools Movement led to the creation of the first publicly available schools system in the United States (Hinsdale, 1898; *The Common School Journal*, 1839). Though schooling access was still restricted on the basis of race, common schools provided White children of different socioeconomic backgrounds an opportunity to receive a publicly funded education (Reese, 2005; Urban et al., 2019). Horace Mann, who is considered by many the leader of the Common School Movement, believed that universal access to education was integral to the future of the United States because it would foster the development of productive and morally sound citizens (Hinsdale, 1898). From Mann's perspective, without education an individual is unable to meaningfully participate in a democratic society. Common school curriculum focused on the three R's: reading, writing, and arithmetic, with a strong emphasis on moral development to instill civic virtues. Common school advocates believed that public education served a public good because it prepared students for work and socialized them into acceptable ways of being.

One of the lasting contributions of Mann's work is standardization within education. Mann argued that a standard universal education was necessary to ensure that all students have equitable access to learning (Mann, 1867) . From Mann's perspective, if all students learn the same core knowledge and skills, they will all be equally equipped for success later in life, allowing education to serve as the great equalizer. In order to ensure that all students were receiving the same quality education, Mann became one of the first proponents of measuring students' academic progress through the use of exams (Garrison, 2019). These exams eventually evolved into the standardized assessments that students take today (Gallagher, 2003). During the Common Schools Movement when the demographics of public schools were overwhelmingly white, performance exams were utilized as indicators of school and teacher efficacy, as opposed to student success. Mann is credited with providing one of the first mechanisms for assessing school effectiveness within the United States and much of his logic on standardization is still adhered to today.

John Dewey, another prominent figure in the development of universal public education in the United States, aligned with Mann and others who viewed education as a core aspect of a functioning democracy. For Dewey, public education needed to focus on the development of active and informed citizens (1916). Dewey, however, differed from Mann by arguing for schools to teach students critical thinking as opposed to morality. Dewey did not outright reject morality, but instead placed particular focus on the development of independent thinkers. In his famed 1910 book, *How We Think*, Dewey suggested that education should not be a passive process where students receive information, but instead should cultivate critical thinkers who have the ability to solve problems through reflection and inquiry. Dewey believed critical thinking was key for individuals in a democratic society because they needed to be able to think

for themselves. While his emphasis on critical thinking extended contemporary beliefs about the goals of public education, he was consistent with Mann's assertion in that he viewed education as a tool to prepare people to meaningfully contribute to society.

I begin by detailing the foundation of public education in the United States to establish that public schools were originally viewed as a vehicle for ensuring the future of the United States through developing a literate and informed populace capable of participating in democratic governance (Goldin, 1999; Harris, 2018; Kober & Rentner, 2020; Labaree, 2018). The architects of public education conceptualized an effective school as one that taught the basics of literacy development and mathematics, and that adequately prepared students to be contributing members of society. There are scant details on how effective schools at the time approached education, but there is evidence that school efficacy was primarily measured by how well students performed on their oral exams. These architects of public education typified a successful student as morally upstanding, able to obtain gainful employment, and engaged in the civic process. The beliefs that these aforementioned politicians and thinkers held about public education only considered White children. Consequently, our foundational understanding of the purpose of schools, what schools should do, and what a successful student is all center on Whiteness.

While the groundwork for public education for White students was being established in the United States, millions of Black folks suffered under the brutality of chattel slavery. Scholarship such as that of Carter G. Woodson and W.E.B Du Bois details the unique relationship Black folks' have had with education because we had been legally and systemically denied access to education (Itzigsohn & Brown, 2020; Woodson, 1993). Privilege allowed White folks to view education as a means for developing morality and productive citizenry; by contrast

Black folks saw education as a tool for reclaiming their humanity (Ballard, 1973). Abolitionist James Pennington once said that, “There is one sin that slavery committed against me, which I can never forgive. It robbed me of my education” (p.138). Educational deprivation was weaponized by White people as a tool to dehumanize Black people and ensure their retention as second class citizens (Wilkerson, 2020). After the Civil War, formerly enslaved Africans immediately sought out educational opportunities, recognizing it as integral for the advancement of the post-emancipation U.S. Black community. Harriet Beecher Stowe described Black folks’ desire for knowledge and education the following way: “They [formerly enslaved Africans] rushed not to the grog-shop but to the schoolroom—they cried for the spelling-book as bread, and pleaded for teachers as a necessity of life” (p. 5). The thought of engaging in the civic process was a distant dream for Black folks in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, so an effective school for Black folks at the time was one where they were afforded the opportunity to learn and reclaim their humanity. A successful Black student was generally understood as a student with the ability to transform social, political, and economic circumstances for themselves, their family, and their community (Givens, 2023).

James Anderson (1988) describes how Black folks in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century agreed on a need for public education, yet they felt strongly that Black folks needed some control over what happened in schools with Black children. It is well chronicled that the development of the first Black schools would not have been possible without the contributions of White folks, most notably the Freedmen’s Bureau (Cimbala & Miller, 1999; Crouch, 1999; Peirce, 1904). However, while Black folks accepted assistance from White people, they did not want to construct another mechanism for Whites to continue their domination over the Black community. Recounts from White missionaries tasked with educating Black students at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>



century explain that newly freed Africans insisted on controlling their own education and creating schools that were beneficial and sustainable for the Black community (Anderson, 1988). An effective school for Black folks at the time was one that was primarily operated by Black people, taught Black students core literacy and math skills, and contributed to racial and communal uplift (Anderson, 1988; Ballard, 1973; Walker, 1996). Givens (2021) sheds light on why Black people wanted control of their own education because education served a fundamentally different purpose for their lives than it did for White people. Post-emancipation education played a vital role in the establishment of the Black community as a new social class within the United States. From its inception, public education was viewed markedly different by Black folks and therefore their understanding of what makes an effective school, and a successful Black student has remained vastly different than that of the dominant culture. Black student success and school quality could not be measured using the same metrics used for White students because Black folks did not have the same opportunities within the United States and were aiming for goals that were vastly different than White people's.

### **Education and Industrialization**

As society evolves so too does the purpose of schooling, and as the United States shifted from an agrarian to an industrial economy, schooling increasingly became about worker development and no longer solely focused on civic responsibilities (Bell, 2004). Tyack and Cuban (1995) detail how the expansion of the industrial industry led to increased need for an efficient and skilled workforce. As the purpose of public education changed, conceptions of effective schools changed accordingly. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century schools began to broaden their curricular offerings beyond the three Rs by offering vocational and technical training for students (Kliebard, 2004; Spring, 2010). In the early 1900s,

an effective school was a school that developed competent and efficient workers. Callahan (1964) explores how during post-industrialization schools began to emphasize traits such as punctuality and obedience because they believed it would lead to the development of productive workers. A successful student was therefore understood as an individual who was viable in the workplace.

During this same time period a tremendous change in Black education occurred. Anderson (1988) provides a critical analysis of how at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Southern Black leaders, in collaboration with Northern White philanthropists, leveraged their political influence to advocate for public education for Black children in the South—believing that education could serve as a tool to disrupt racism. Radical White Republicans in the reconstruction era were not advocating for equality for Black folks, but they took issue with the brutality of racism in the south at the time and felt Black folks deserved a semblance of humanity (Cimbala & Miller, 1999). White people did not view public education for Black children as the great equalizer like they did for White children, but rather a way of preparing Black children for second-class citizenship. Southern Whites strongly opposed public education for Blacks in the south because they feared it would lead to a disruption in the social order (Black, 2025). Northern whites were eventually able to persuade Southern whites to recognize the benefit of public education for Black folks by arguing that the development of industrially trained laborers as lucrative to the Southern economy (Billings, 1979). From the perspective of White folks, an effective school for Black students at the time taught rudimentary literacy and mathematics, prepared Black students to work jobs in labor, and ensured Black students understood their social status as second-class citizens. A successful Black student in the eyes of many early 20<sup>th</sup> century

whites was a Black student who worked efficiently and abided by the explicit and implicit racial laws and norms of the time.

While prominent Black figures of this era, such as Booker T. Washington, supported this idea of subservient education for Black folks (Washington, 2000), many other Black people still viewed education as a tool for racial advancement. They wanted an education that did more than just prepare themselves and their children for industrial work, and that would lead to communal uplift and, potentially, full citizenry in the United States (Du Bois, 1903; Du Bois & Eaton, 1996). From the perspective of many Black folks, an effective school for Black students was one that taught core content knowledge and contributed to the development of the Black community (Anderson, 1988; Givens, 2021). Within the Black community, a successful Black student was not just a laborer who was beneficial to the economy but was an individual who defied the racial restrictions of the time. These historical sources are not intended to provide an in-depth review of public education's development in the United States, but are detailed to demonstrate that conceptions of an effective school and student success have varied over time depending on a variety of factors such as race, the economy, and societal culture. After the passing of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, the United States made a superficial attempt to construct an 'egalitarian' public education system, presenting the illusion of shared goals for all children (Bell, 2004b; R. C. Johnson, 2019). For the first time the United States, Black students were legally guaranteed the right to receive the same quality of education as White students, however; White beliefs, values, and culture continued to dominate and exert significant influence.

### **Public Education Post-*Brown v. Board***

White supremacy played a key role in student success becoming synonymous with student performance on academic proficiency assessments. An extensive body of literature

demonstrates that as standardized testing proliferated across the United States in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, standardized test scores were used as pseudo-evidence to “prove” Black intellectual deficiencies (Garrison, 2019; Lemann, 1999; Shuey, 1966). Scholars such as Johnathan Zimmer (2022) and Vanessa Siddle-Walkers (Walker, 1996) have detailed how Black student academic capabilities were often ignored or diminished because of these students’ performance on standardized assessments, and despite their demonstrations of academic mastery in their segregated schools. Darling-Hammond (2010) argues that after the passing of *Brown v. Board*, student performance on standardized assessments was used to craft a narrowed view of student success and school efficacy. A successful student performed well on academic performance metrics, and an effective school was one where the majority of its students performed well on these same academic performance metrics. Narrowed framing of student success as synonymous with or defined by academic achievement placed White students at the top and Black students at the bottom of the social order and intellectual ladder, reinforcing White supremacist notions of Black intellectual inferiority. Moreover, because White students performed better on these assessments, only White schools had the requisite makeup to be deemed an effective school.

As academic achievement emerged as the primary indicator of student success, educational discourse was rife with anti-Black, deficit-based recommendations to enhance Black student success. The scholarship of Doddy (1960) provides insight into how researchers at the time believed Black students, Black parents, and Black schools needed to improve in order for Black students to be successful. Doddy began with recommendations for Black students and caregivers:

Negroes everywhere who have any responsibility for the education of Negro children must assume an attitude of seriousness about education than we have seldom, if ever, demonstrated before... This task that is confronting us calls for a complete reorientation of those connected with the operation of Negro schools. Negro parents will have to take a

most active interest in the education of their children...They will have to attend school meetings and become familiar with the school's program and problems. They will have to start making greater demands on both the children and the schools for a higher level of performance. (p.68)

He then provided recommendations to improve the efficacy of Black schools:

Negro teachers will have to increase their effectiveness in the classroom. They will have to take immediate steps to broaden their command of general education and show a greater interest in the welfare of children. They will have to elevate their standard of performance required of the students...Negro administrators will have to get untangled from the mass of administrative details and start giving their attention to the quality of program offered and how instruction can be improved. They must start setting higher requirements of performance for teachers and developing the courage to recommend the discharge of those who are not functioning effectively. (p.69)

Despite Black folks' insistence on educational access, there were still widely held beliefs that Black students did not perform well in school because Black people did not value education. A number of cultural deficit theorists emerged at the time arguing that Black students did not succeed in school because they were not pathologically inclined for learning (Deutsch, 1967; Hess & Shipman, 1965; Ladson-Billings, 2016). These racist ideologies led to the belief that an effective school for Black students was one where Black children could learn White norms and values that in turn could spur academic achievement. Black student success was defined by and measured in comparison to whiteness. Though cultural-deficit theories have largely disappeared from contemporary educational research, there is compelling evidence that these foundational conceptions of Black students still permeate educational research and schools today (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Gershenson & Papageorge, 2018; Howard, 2010; Love, 2019).

Russel Rickford's 2016 work, *We Are an African People*, provides a contrasting view of K-12 education for Black folks in the mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century. By exclusively foregrounding the perspective of Black families, community members, and educators, Rickford's work demonstrates that for Black folks post *Brown v. Board*, education still served a fundamentally

different purpose than it did for the masses of White America. Rickford explains that for Black Americans, education, “offered a means of pursuing self-reliance, meeting social needs, and conveying moral and political principles” (p.13). This insight is important because it contributes to the argument that success for Black students at the time could not be minimized to academic achievement. Rickford argues that the traditional markers of success determined by white-dominated institutions failed to address the deeper, systemic issues of racial oppression within public education and society. By engaging the perspective of Black parents and community members, Rickford shows that success for Black students was not merely about individual advancement within an unequal system but about fostering a strong sense of identity and commitment to the Black community's broader struggles against racial injustice. Rickford’s work is situated within a specific space and time, while my research explored similar ideals but within a modern context to understand contemporary views that Black parents and community members have of education and student success.

In more contemporary education research, little to no scholarship explores varied constructs of success, particularly for Black students. The majority of research on Black student success within education aligns with normative conceptions of student success that are primarily derived from White supremacist values and beliefs. Some research at the higher educational level does explore varied constructs of success for Black students, uplifting unique views of success for Black students such as identity development and communal uplift (Ross et al., 2016; Stevens et al., 2019), but a paucity of research explores the phenomenon at the K-12 level. One hypothesis behind this research asserts that the field has struggled to improve for Black students because our recommendations toward enhancing Black student and our constructs of effective schools are misaligned with the beliefs and values of Black people.

## **Essential Components of Effective Schools for Black Students**

Over the course of the past 40 years countless scholars have provided a host of recommendations for enhancing Black student success and how to construct schools that are effective in educating Black students. Because the scope of this research is primarily focused on in-school practices, I detail relevant literature on Black student success and school efficacy at three levels:

1. Organizational Structure and Institutional Culture
2. School Leadership
3. Teachers, Curriculum, and Pedagogy

### *Organizational Structure and Institutional Culture*

I begin this section with a brief overview of organizational theory because for several decades now organizational theory has been utilized to explore why organizations function the way that they do (Jones, 2010). Schools are complex organizations with a myriad of different actors, and the structures within school's shape students' experiences and outcomes. Max Weber is generally recognized as the founder of organizational theory, originally using the concept to understand how to maximize efficiency within complex organizations (Weber, 1978). Weber's work paid particular attention to bureaucracy, arguing that as any organization grows and evolves, so too does its need for authoritative leadership and clearly defined rules. His work laid the foundation for many scholars today, as organizational theory is widely applied across disciplines to analyze and critique how and why organizations function in the manner they do. Though organizational theory is most commonly applied within economics, education researchers often utilize it to complexify our understanding of how schools operate and to explore the construction of school culture. Organizational theory is frequently used in education to examine school leadership, decision-making, and reform efforts (Capper, 2018; Manning,

2013; Marion & Gonzales, 2013). For instance, Fullan (2007) used organizational theory to understand how educational systems change over time through the adoption of new practices and policy. While Fullan's work emphasizes the role of leadership in communicating and implementing changes, he also concluded that buy-in from other stakeholders, such as teachers, has a significant impact on the evolution of school systems over time. Organizational theory's attention to different stakeholders within complex systems is foundational to this study as my research design seeks to engage the voices of those frequently omitted within education research. Within this project, organizational theory guided my exploration of stakeholder engagement and how the belief systems and decision-making within organizations contribute to school culture.

Two of the foremost experts in effective schools' research, Dr. Ronald Edmonds and Dr. Barbara Sizemore, were among the earliest scholars to identify key characteristics of schools that effectively serving marginalized student populations. Although Edmonds and Sizemore focused on different student populations, their work was united in its rejection of the dominant narrative of the time—that poor students and students of color were inherently incapable of academic success due to presumed familial and cultural deficits. (Coleman et al., 1966). Edmonds (1979) offered a succinct yet powerful synthesis of multiple studies examining high-achieving schools serving economically disadvantaged students. He argued that the knowledge necessary to support the academic success of all students already exists but is not equitably applied. In his analysis, Edmonds (1979) identified six core characteristics that define effective schools for low-income children:

(a) They have strong administrative ... (b) ...a climate of expectation in which no children are permitted to fall below minimum but efficacious levels of achievement; (c) The school's atmosphere is orderly without being rigid ... (d) ...pupil acquisition of basic school skills takes precedence over all other school activities; (e) ... school energy and resources can be diverted from other business in furtherance of the fundamental objectives; and (f) ... pupil progress can be frequently monitored. (p.22)



Similarly, Sizemore was trailblazing in her analysis of effective schools specifically for Black students. Sizemore (Sizemore, 1985) critiqued earlier scholarship on effective schools for low-income students—such as Edmonds’ work—for relying too heavily on standardized assessments as the primary measure of school success. Instead, she emphasized the importance of centering the voices of Black parents to better understand what constitutes an effective school for Black children. Her research revealed that Black parents strongly valued content mastery and academic achievement, while simultaneously expressing deep skepticism toward relinquishing control of their children to a public school system they did not fully trust. Grounded in this understanding, Sizemore argued that effective schools are those that meet the goals articulated by their key stakeholders. Through her work, Sizemore (1985) identified six indispensable characteristics consistently found in schools that effectively served Black students:

(1) the recruitment and selection of moderately authoritarian principals who believed that black poor students could and would learn; (2) the willingness of the principals to take the risk of differing with the system's norm of low achievement for black poor schools; (3) the mobilization of consensus among school and community actors around high achievement as the highest priority goal; (4) the generation of a climate of high expectations for student achievement conducive to teaching and learning; (5) the choice of functional routines, scenarios, and processes for the achievement of this highest priority; and (6) the willingness to disagree with superior officers around the choices of these routines and their implementation. (p.271)

Although Sizemore called for the intentional exploration of what constitutes effectiveness for Black students more than three decades ago, the field still contains far more empirical evidence detailing what has failed Black students than what has fostered their academic achievement—underscoring the ongoing need for this line of research. While contemporary research may no longer explicitly rely on cultural pathology explanations, I argue that the persistent rehashing of Black student failure contributes to a broader narrative of Black ineducability—normalizing it and rendering it not only palatable but a banal feature of American education.

Studying educational institutions that are effective for Black students is frequently found in higher education literature (Allen, 1992; Arroyo & Gasman, 2014; Kim, 2002; Wilson, 2007) but rarely in K-12 literature with specific attention to race. I believe it is critical to examine the practices of HBCUs because HBCUs are the oldest educational institutions in the country with an established history of effectively educating Black students. Black students attending HBCUs often outperform Black students at PWIs on numerous achievement metrics. Allen (1992) provided one of the earliest examinations of key factors that contribute to Black student success at historically Black colleges and universities. Drawing from a quantitative data set from the National Study on Black College Students, Allen analyzed the outcomes of more than 2,500 Black students over a three-year period at 953 Historically Black Colleges & Universities (HBCUs) and approximately 1,500 Predominately White Institutions (PWIs).

The findings from Allen's study uncovered a number of key factors that contributed to better experiences and outcomes for Black students attending HBCUs versus those enrolled at PWIs. For example, in his analysis Allen found that Black students perform better in school when they have strong relationships with faculty. Black students having connections with faculty were more commonly found at HBCUs than PWIs. HBCU students reported feeling "engaged, connected, accepted, and supported" (p.39), by their faculty members regardless of the latter's race. Allen's findings demonstrate that in environments where Black students succeed academically, there are protective factors in place to ensure their safety and connectedness to the institution. I argue that HBCUs are one of our best examples of educational institutions that are effective in educating Black students; the goal of my research is to study K-12 schools to identify key contributors to Black student success at highly effective institutions for Black students.

The aforementioned research on HBCUs is distinctive for a variety of reasons, but one aspect that differentiates this literature from normative discourse on Black students is that it operates from an asset-based, rather than deficit-based, perspective. Though HBCUs on average have smaller endowments and fewer resources than similarly situated PWIs (Albritton, 2012), these scholars (Allen, 1992; Arroyo & Gasman, 2014b; Hirt et al., 2008; Wilson, 2007) have focused on what HBCUs do have rather than what they do not have or are presumed to lack. In my exploration of effective K-12 schools for Black students, I have similar intentions. Instead of focusing on what these schools do not have in comparison to more affluent White schools, I examined details of approaches and actions these schools are undertaking that are working for Black students.

There are also several scholars contributing to the literature at the K-12 level who have offered in-depth analysis of what schools can do at an organizational and school culture level to positively impact the learning experiences of Black students. James Comer (1980) authored one of the earliest works with an explicit focus on school culture and organizational structures impacting Black students. Comer's research was particularly innovative at the time because he was one of few scholars who emphasized the importance of school, community, and parent partnerships for the efficacy of schools serving Black students. Much of the then-current research on effective schools paid little attention to collaboration amongst stakeholders outside of school settings (Ravitch, 1984). His groundbreaking Comer School Development Program, was based on the belief that a strong school culture was cultivated through the creation of an environment where students feel emotionally and socially supported. Comer believed this was especially important for Black students and that schools serving Black students needed to develop strong

partnerships between teachers, parents, administrators, and the community to foster a supportive and holistic learning environment.

Psychologist Asa Hilliard believed that Black students would succeed in school if they were provided K-12 spaces that were reflective of the values and rich history of the Black community. In *The Maroon Within Us: Selected Essays on African American Community Socialization*, Hilliard (1995) illuminates his vision of effective schools for Black students. Simply put, Hilliard made the case that schools that were effective in educating Black children made Black children feel good about being Black. Hilliard firmly believed that Black students needed to grow academically and show content mastery just like other students, but he insisted that Black students' identity development be a crucial part of the school process. For Hilliard, an effective school for Black students had to de-center whiteness because Eurocentric curricula further marginalized Black students. He instead envisioned schools that affirmed the cultural heritage of Black students through curriculum and school-wide practices. In the eyes of Hilliard, these schools that were effective for Black students also needed to hold high expectations of those they educated, as he believed that Black students were highly capable learners.

Theresa Perry's 2003 work, *Young, Gifted, and Black: Promoting High Achievement Among African American Students*, also provides key insights on the importance of school culture in relation to Black student success by exploring the conditions within schools where Black students were succeeding. Perry's work debunks myths of the Black community devaluing education or being culturally incompatible with learning by detailing the history of Black struggle for education and its value across generations within the Black community. Similar to Hilliard, she found high expectations and identity development as key drivers of success in highly effective schools for Black student (Perry & Steele, 2004). Perry explains that lowering

academic standards only harms Black students, and that in order for Black students to achieve they need rigorous curriculum and highly qualified teachers. Moreover, one of the lasting contributions of her work was her discovery that Black students sometimes feel that academic success comes at a sacrifice of their racial identity. Therefore, to construct effective schools for Black students, schools must also tend to identity development of Black students and re-imagine Blackness in a way that supports Black students' academic success.

In more contemporary research, researchers have offered alternative suggestions for cultivating school environments that are effective in educating Black students. For instance, recent scholarship from Spencer and Ullucci (2022) as well as that of Diamond and Gomez (2023) have highlighted how effective schools for Black students must attend to the pernicious effects of anti-Blackness. These scholars' concept of anti-Blackness is derived from scholars like Michael Dumas (Dumas, 2016) and Kihana Ross (Ross, 2020) who have conceptualized anti-Blackness within education as a deeply ingrained antagonistic relationship between Blackness and the very notion of humanity, that positions Black students as inhumane and uneducable within school spaces (Dumas & Ross, 2016). While these scholars all recognize anti-Blackness as endemic to schools within the United States, they believe a reckoning with anti-Blackness and a restructuring of schools can lead to better academic outcomes for Black students. Spencer and Ullucci, along with Diamond and Gomez, call for changes in school policies and practices that inordinately harm Black students by demonstrating that they are grounded in White logics and punishment of those who do not assimilate into White ways of being. The focus on anti-Blackness within school structures and culture is critical to the field because it has deepened our analysis beyond cultural mismatches to explicitly call out the harmful dehumanization Black

students experience within school spaces. There is, however, a persistent need to complexify and explicate what refuting anti-Blackness looks like in practice.

### *School Leadership*

A wealth of research suggests that because school leaders have the most visible positions of power with K-12 schools, they have a significant impact on the practices and policies within any school environment (Allen et al., 2015; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Hallinger, 2003; Khalifa et al., 2016). Therefore, when exploring school efficacy, it is imperative to explore research on the practices of school leaders who lead schools that are effective in educating Black students. While there is scant literature that exclusively details what school leaders do to improve the educational experiences of Black students, a plethora of research explores the role of school leaders in cultivating inclusive school environments for marginalized student groups through the use of culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) and/or social justice informed practice (Dantley & Tillman, 2006; M. A. Khalifa, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Shields, 2004; Shields & Hesbol, 2020).

Carolyn Riehl (2000) provided one of the earliest reviews of the role of the principal in creating inclusive environments for culturally and racially diverse students. Riehl's work is significant because she recognized the ever-changing demographics of U.S. public schools and emphasized the need for school leaders to adapt practices to ensure that environments are physically, socially, and psychologically safe for all students. In Riehl's review of inclusive school practices, she discovered three central components of principals' responsiveness to diversity within their schools. First, because principals play a central role in the school environment, they have the power to help others within that social environment define what critical phenomena mean, namely diversity. Second, creating inclusive environments within

schools requires the promotion of inclusion within all aspects of a school environment. Finally, inclusion for Riehl also meant fostering a strong connection between the school and its surrounding community. Riehl's early work on the characteristics of inclusive school leaders set the foundation for our later understanding of the development of culturally responsive leadership. However, her work is geared toward multiracial school context, and the majority of Black students do not attend schools with a great deal of racial diversity (Orfield, 2020). Because Black students are most likely to attend schools that are primarily comprised of Black students (Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Orfield & Jarvie, 2020), I intend to explore the enactment of culturally responsive leaderships and inclusive practices specifically for Black students.

In 2006, Gardiner and Enomoto studied six White principals employed in urban contexts in an effort to explore the utility of multicultural leadership (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006). In their work they discovered that each of the six principals encountered issues of racial diversity on their campus but were woefully unprepared to handle these issues due to the lack preparation they received in their training programs around serving diverse student groups. Although, they all lacked formal training in the realm of culturally attuned leadership, some discovered innovative ways to celebrate diversity and create inclusive environments for all students. For example, one leader shared that raising expectations among staff for low-income students of color was an essential component of creating environments that contributed to the success of students of color. Principals also shared that communication with diverse student groups and their families was crucial for creating culturally inclusive environments because it allowed them to better understand the cultural values and nuances of those different from themselves. While this work is insightful in addressing how individuals outside marginalized groups view students of color, my research extends this focus to explore how Black educators perceive Black students.

Additionally, it examines whether the approaches of school leaders differ when working with teachers who share the same racialized background as their students.

The work of George Theoharis is also important in the literature relating to culturally responsive school leadership because he provided an in-depth theorization on the application of social justice leadership in schools (Theoharis, 2007). This empirical study examined seven social justice-oriented principals to understand their enactment of social justice leadership as well as the pushback those leaders faced in their implementation of social justice praxis.

Theoharis operationalized social justice orientation as leaders “who make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically marginalizing factors central to their advocacy” (Theoharis, 2007, p.221). Theoharis found that the enactment of social justice leadership contributed to creating a healthier school environment for students of color but at a personal cost of leaders because it required constant reflection. This work is especially relevant for my study because in recent years there have been increasing attacks on social justice praxis within public schools (Johnson & Harper, 2024) and few studies have explored this phenomena within predominately Black spaces. I am interested in exploring the extent to which the participants narratives in Theohari’s’ research align or differ from my own.

Muhammad Khalifa’s (Khalifa et al., 2016; Khalifa, 2018) research on culturally responsive leadership is also relevant to my study because his work explores how school leaders foster school environments that are inclusive of all students. Khalifa’s work evolves from Gloria Ladson-Billings’ (1995) conceptualization of culturally responsive pedagogy. He argues that culturally responsive leaders constantly impact the school environment and work tirelessly to create safe, inclusive, and sustaining environments that meet the needs of families, teachers, and students (Khalifa et al., 2016). The four tenets that guide CRSL are: 1) being critically self-



reflective, 2) developing and sustaining culturally responsive teachers and curricula, 3) promoting inclusive and anti-oppressive school context, and 4) engaging students' indigenous community context (Khalifa, 2018). I was interested in exploring the utility of this framework within my study through a specific focus on Black students and the extent to which culturally responsive leadership practices for Black students are beneficial to the collective student body. Moreover, I was interested in examining how closely aligned the practices of school leaders in my study are to the tenants outlined in Khalifa's framework.

### *Teachers, Curriculum, and Pedagogy*

Lastly, an interrogation of effective schools for Black students must also grapple with teachers, curriculum, and pedagogy. If student success is measured by their performance on standardized assessments, we must have a robust understanding of what contributes to positive learning outcomes for Black students. In the 1980s scholars began to argue that developing culturally synchronous learning environments was crucial for the success of non-White students (Au, 1980; Banks, 1975; Erickson, 1987; Gay, 1994; Jordan, 1985; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Mohatt and Erickson, 1981). Though scholars have utilized a variety of terminology such as culturally appropriate (Au, 1980), multicultural education (Banks, 1975), and culturally responsive (Erickson, 1987; Gay, 1994) the underlying premise of their work is the same; culture influences the way students learn. If educators want to improve educational outcomes and experiences for students of non-dominant backgrounds (i.e., non-Whites) educators must create learning environments that recognize, validate, and build on the cultural knowledge of the students they serve. The work of these aforementioned scholars has been critical to the field of education because it has highlighted the plethora of ways that schools are exclusionary monocultural spaces that favor middle-class White students (Leonardo, 2012).

The term cultural congruence first began to appear in educational literature during the 1980s, as scholars such as Kathryn Au and Frederick Erickson conducted studies that revealed indigenous students frequently performed better in school when the instruction they received was congruent with the ways they learned and interacted within their own community. In Au's (1980) seminal work, "Participation Structures in a Reading Lesson with Hawaiian Children: Analysis of a Culturally Appropriate Instructional Event," she analyzed in-class participation to determine how it impacted the academic performance of native Hawaiian children. Au found that when teachers allowed students to communicate in the "talkstory" (Au, p.93) format they were accustomed to, students' academic performance on standardized assessments improved. Au termed this form of instruction as culturally congruent because it was grounded in the cultural norms of the students it was intended for. In the following excerpt, Au details the purpose of culturally congruent education:

The overall hypothesis in research on cultural congruence is that students of diverse backgrounds often do poorly in school because of a mismatch between the culture of the school and the culture of the home. Students have less opportunity to learn when school lessons and other activities are conducted, or socially organized, in a manner inconsistent with the values and norms of their home culture. (Hollins et al., 1994, p.6 )

The epistemological stance of my research is in direct alignment with Au; I believe schools that are effective in educating Black students are intentionally constructed to reflect the learning preferences of Black students. I also believe White students often perform better in school compared to other student groups because the structure and practice of K-12 schools in the United States, from pedagogy to policy, is designed for the success of White children. For example, when White people across the country falsely complained that Critical Race Theory being taught in K-12 schools and was making White children feel bad for being White, swift action was taken by districts and policy makers across the country to ensure the removal of said

content (Pollock & Rogers, 2022). White students succeed in schools because there is consistent action taken to meet their needs. While it is controversial to argue that the affirmation of White supremacy enhances White student success, the direct action taken to protect White children is undoubtably reflective of a system that will adapt to ensure White students succeed. If we want Black students and other students of color to bridge the “achievement gap,” the onus is on us as researchers, policy makers, and practitioners to bring about the same level of responsiveness. A myriad of Black scholars have written about how to create learning environments that are reflective and affirming of Black students.

For years educational researchers such as James Banks (1975, 2002, 2019), Gloria Ladson- Billings (1995, 2009), Geneva Gay (1994, 2000, 2018), Zaretta Hammond (2014, 2021), and Gholdy Muhammad (Muhammad, 2020) have written work suggesting that the improvement of educational outcomes for Black students requires shifting curriculum in a manner that is culturally aligned with Black people’s culture, experiences, and history. In 1994, Gloria Ladson- Billings explained culturally responsive teaching as, “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p.18.). Her logic was that if Black students and other students of color were provided the same privileges as White students—an education reflective of their lived experiences—their engagement and achievement in school would bloom. Hammond (2014) furthers this work by using neuroscience to explain that Black students and other students of color are at an academic disadvantage in schools when their educators do not account for the unique ways in which they understand the world. Hammond explains,

Culture, it turns out, is the way that every brain makes sense of the world. That is why everyone, regardless of race or ethnicity, has a culture. Think of culture as software for the brain’s hardware. The brain uses cultural information to turn everyday happenings into meaningful events. If we want to help dependent learners do more high order

thinking and problem solving, then we have to access their brain's cognitive structures to deliver culturally responsive instruction. (p.22)

This work has been critical to the field because it has shown that Black students do not lack academic capability but instead are deprived of an education that is designed for them to succeed. Unfortunately, many hold the erroneous belief that culturally responsive practices come at the expense of academic rigor. Therefore, a need for empirical evidence of culturally responsive of culturally responsive practice leading to improved student outcomes still exists. Because culturally responsive teaching is often misinterpreted as a fix all for the academic perils of Black students, several scholars have explored what makes culturally responsive teaching work in some school contexts as opposed to others.

Two foremost experts on Black students in education have argued that outside of culturally responsive curriculum, teachers capacity to effectively communicate care is an integral ingredient for successfully educating Black children (Howard, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2021). Howard (2001) explored Black students' perception of culturally relevant teaching to fill a gap in the literature related to how students interpret and are impacted by culturally relevant pedagogical practices. In Ladson-Billings (2021) work, she explored the enactment of care to challenge its normative feminist orientation. Feminist literature was one of the first disciplines to theorize about the utility of care and later applied it to schooling (Collins, 1995; Gilligan, 1982). Similar to previous Black scholars, Ladson-Billings's conceptualization of care aligns more closely with Collins's (1989) ideas wherein care is not just emotional but is also a cognitive commitment and attentiveness to the betterment of others with a critical conscious orientation. Ladson- Billings (2021) writes:

Caring [for teachers] was their concern for the implications their work had on their students' lives, the welfare of the community, and unjust social arrangements. Thus, rather than the idiosyncratic caring for individual students, the teachers spoke of the

import of their work for preparing their students for confronting inequitable and undemocratic social structures. (p. 24)

Care is not solely an emotional process, but a cognitive psychosocial process that allows educators to provide students individualized support for their optimal growth and development. In line with the previously discussed foundation of Black education, caring for Black students—even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century—requires providing tools for them to challenge the oppression in their own lives and communities.

While Howard (2001) found that culturally relevant teaching increases student engagement and outcomes, one of his primary findings was that Black students responded positively to teachers who had successfully communicated care. In the following excerpt, Howard delves into detail about the culturally nuanced ways that care can be demonstrated:

Care, as an ethic in teaching, includes explicitly showing affective and nurturing behavior toward students, which can have a positive influence on students' desire to learn. According to several students in this study, care is also sometimes shown in what could be perceived in nonendearing ways. Several students equated their teachers' concern and care with certain interactions that could be interpreted as harsh or extreme by those unfamiliar with the cultural context in which they occur. (p. 128)

Howard's assertion makes clear that the enactment of care is a culturally nuanced endeavor requiring an in-depth understanding of the students it is intended for. Many of teachers depicted above interacted with students in ways that were familiar to students based on familial or cultural norms that allowed them to feel a level of care. Ultimately, both scholars exhibit how care for Black students is a critical component of supporting Black student success.

Ladson-Billings's and Howard's scholarship is reminiscent of the work of previous scholars who discussed educators serving roles of othermothers for Black students in K-12 settings. Case (1997) presents an account of two Black female teachers to investigate the enactment of othermothering, which Case explains as a historical practice of fictive kinship

within the Black community that began during enslavement as a result of the continued separation of Black families. Through her exploration, she finds that effectively educating Black students requires recognition of the whole child as well as the sociopolitical contexts of which the students live. Providing proper nurturing for Black children required teachers to intertwine themselves within the community to familiarize themselves with students as well as their families. This firsthand information about students within their communities allowed teachers to meet the needs of their students. Case's work is useful for understanding the ways that Black female teachers develop relationships with Black students but does not offer many insights into non-Black teachers building relationships with Black students—neither how they do or how they should. Particularly in a time when Black teachers are scarce in many school settings (Pizarro & Kohli, 2018), there is a need to further theorize how othermothering can be provided to Black children by non-Black and non-female educators.

Though the term othermothering is seldom found in current educational research, its core ideals around connecting to students and demonstrating care serve as the foundation of much of the contemporary research on the importance of meaningful relationships between teachers and students. An established body of research reveals that Black students in particular perform better in school when they have positive relationships with educators (Howard et al., 2020). Warren (2016) argues that a critical part of developing these relationships with Black students is again the enactment of effective care. Warren also explains the connection between care and relationship building: "Teachers who have positive relationships with students have successfully communicated their care for students" (p.33). Successfully communicating care, according to Warren, is only possible if care is "congruent with the notions of care that constituents hold" (p. 38). Warren's conception of care suggests that educators must be willing to relinquish some of

their power in schools and position themselves as learners, but the unfortunate reality is that the voices of Black students and parents are often not valued in school settings (Howard & Reynolds, 2008). Warren believes that relinquishing power is critical for building caring environments because it gives caregivers and students shared ownership within the school space. This dissertation explores how educators relinquish power in practice and communicate to students and families that they are valued stakeholders within the school environment.

### **Conceptual Framework**

As previously stated, Harper's (2012) anti-deficit achievement framework (ADAF) will be used to develop instrumentation and guide my interpretive lens on this research, while the overarching goal will be to develop a grounded theory on effective schools for Black students that considers varied constructs of student success. Harper (2012) developed his anti-deficit achievement framework to help researchers better understand successful Black male college students. The framework's innovation lies within how researchers frame their research questions. Harper explains the distinction: "The framework inverts questions that are commonly asked about educational disadvantage, underrepresentation, insufficient preparation, academic underperformance, disengagement, and Black male student attrition" (p. 5). Inverting commonly held conceptions about Black students not only allows for the disruption of monolithic beliefs about Black students, but also helps to illuminate protective factors that disrupt these patterns.

#### *Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework*

An early version of Harper's anti-deficit framework was used in Harper's (2010) study on STEM<sup>3</sup> outcomes for students from non-dominant backgrounds. The study analyzed the

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<sup>3</sup> STEM refers to the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics, emphasizing an interdisciplinary approach to education and innovation aimed at preparing individuals for careers in these technical and scientific areas.

experiences of approximately 200 Black male college students enrolled across 42 collegiate campuses, with the aim of understanding how these students persisted in pursuing majors in the STEM field despite the structural and social barriers that have historically excluded folks of color. Studying Black male outcomes from an asset-based perspective allowed Harper to understand how factors such as extracurricular involvement in STEM-centered programs allow Black male students to overcome certain barriers to entry into the STEM field. The ADAF framework allowed Harper to contribute to literature on improving Black male student outcomes, rather than rehashing the multitude of ways school fails to include Black males. My research seeks similar outcomes, as I intentionally studied schools with an established reputation and documented record of effectively educating Black students to contribute to our understanding of how schools can be improved for Black students. Ladson-Billings (2017) asked the question, “What happens in classrooms where teachers are successful with African American students?” (p. 87). Such a question cannot be answered by focusing on failure; we must study, analyze, and learn from models of success if we want to shift the current paradigm. The following sources are examples of how other scholars have taken up ADAF in their research.

Cooper and Hawkins (Cooper & Hawkins, 2016) utilized Harper’s anti-deficit framework to examine the educational experiences of undergraduate Black male student athletes that attend HBCUs. Using a sample size of approximately 50 Black male student athletes at one institution, the authors aimed to understand what factors at said institution were instrumental in their success. According to the authors, Harper’s anti-deficit framework was critical for this study because it allowed them to understand what actions and approaches can be enacted at an institutional level to improve educational experiences for Black male student athletes. Through a mixed methods exploration that included an in-depth questionnaire as well as focus groups and



individual interviews, the researchers found that meaningful connections to staff, faculty, and students were key to student success. The HBCU these student athletes attended provided them with a feeling of belonging and connectedness that empowered them to succeed academically.

In a similar study, Cooper et al. (2016) again borrowed from Harper's anti-deficit framework to analyze the experiences of undergraduate Black female student athletes at predominately White institutions. With a small sample size of five Black female student athletes at a Division 1 institution, the authors sought to provide a robust examination of how Black female student athletes successfully navigated historically White institutions. Harper's anti-deficit framework was again used to understand key factors that contributed to student success, but one of Cooper and his colleagues' goals in this work was to extend the framework beyond studying the experiences of Black males. Though Harper originally developed this framework with the intention of exploring outcomes for Black males, he notes that the goal of the framework is to empower and uncover the experiences of all marginalized folks in educational spaces. For this study in particular, the authors wanted to understand what factors influenced the trajectory of these student athletes that can inform policy and practice meant to help Black female student athletes succeed. Through focus groups and individual interviews, the authors concluded that familial expectations, academic readiness, and self-determination were key factors that not only propelled these students into college but allowed them to thrive once there. Additionally, they found that strong connections with teammates as well as the privileges of being a student athlete were vital parts of their success.

In his phenomenological study on nontraditional Black males, Goings (2016) used Harper's anti-deficit framework to investigate achievement for Black male undergraduates. Similar to aforementioned works that used the anti-deficit framework, Goings aimed to

understand the motivating factors and additional supports that aided in the matriculation of Black males within an educational system not designed for their success. Goings was particularly focused on how his research participants overcame barriers and persisted toward their academic goals in spite of the inequities and racism Black males often face in pursuit of higher education. Goings' analysis revealed that intrinsic motivation, peer/familial support, and campus accommodations made a considerable impact on Black student achievement.

Collins et al. (2017) used Harper's anti-deficit framework to explore the efficacy of a same sex and mix-gendered workshop aimed at improving the leadership skills of Black male undergraduates. Aligned with the goals of Harper's framework, the authors aimed to provide a counternarrative of Black male higher education experiences by focusing on leadership acumen as opposed to failures and obstacles Black male students may face. In their study, the authors sought to complexify leadership development for undergraduate Black males by examining outcomes in a program specifically designed for Black males. Harper's anti-deficit framework was key to their study because its application eliminated the engagement of deficit-based assumptions and instead focused on what works for Black males. This research highlights the importance of identity and culturally relevant co-curricular opportunities for minoritized student groups.

### *Grounded Theory*

Grounded theory is a qualitative methodological research approach developed by sociologist Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in the 1960s that challenges traditional approaches to qualitative research by using the collected data to construct a theory, as opposed to using a theory to test data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I am using a grounded theory approach in this research because despite decades of research, the field of education has yet to solve the

conundrum of Black student achievement. Grounded theory is systematic qualitative methodology that generates theory “grounded” in data through an iterative process of data collection and analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Walker & Myrick, 2006). Unlike traditional methodological framework, grounded theory attempts to unravel the meanings of people’s interactions, behavior, and experiences without any preconceived notions or outcomes in mind and instead allows the data to lead theory formation. The primary benefit of employing a grounded theory approach in this research is that it allows for the development of a theory based on the practices, policies, and procedures already in place in effective schools serving Black students.

A theory on effective schools for Black students that is drawn from insights on two highly effective schools ensures that the findings are empirically grounded and that all subsequent recommendations are supported by practical insights derived from real-world contexts. Furthermore, much of the existing educational literature on improving school environments for Black students is limited by a narrow conceptualization of student success, often grounded in principles of whiteness (Khalifa et al., 2016). As a result, many existing frameworks focus solely on academic achievement and offer limited insights into how schools can foster a more holistic and varied understanding of success for Black students. This theory is not intended to offer a universal solution for addressing the challenges of Black student in schools. Rather, it serves as an instructive guide or analytical tool that can be adapted, refined, and evolved to suit different contexts and inform future research and practice.

Glaser and Strauss co-created grounded theory while studying palliative care in hospitals (Glaser & Strauss, 1965); the goal of their research was to fill an existent gap in the literature on the social processes of dying by paying specific attention to communication between patients and

staff. The researchers noticed that there was an over reliance within social sciences research on deductive research approaches, and instead envisioned an inductive approach for exploring complex phenomena (Walker & Myrick, 2006). From the perspective of Glaser and Strauss, deductive research approaches limited the ability of researchers because they were confined by rigid hypothesis that prevented them from endeavoring into more complex exploration of the phenomena they were studying (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Martin & Gynnild, 2011). Glaser and Strauss invented grounded theory to create rigorous methodology for generating new theories about human behavior and social interactions directly from real-world research.

Though Glaser and Strauss developed this concept together with the shared goal of developing substantive theories with real world application, over time differences emerged in their beliefs as to how researchers develop grounded theory (Heath & Cowley, 2004). In their original conception of the theory, Glaser and Strauss outlined two levels of coding in the process of developing a grounded theory. Walker and Myrick (2006) explain their two-stage coding process in the following way:

In the first process, the analyst codes all data and then systematically analyzes these codes to verify or prove a given proposition. In the second process, the analyst does not engage in coding data per se but merely inspects the data for properties of categories, uses memos to track the analysis, and develops theoretical ideas. (p.548)

Grounded theory is distinct in its reliance on the constant comparison of data, which is a core part of its methodology. Glaser and Strauss (1967) explains that the two coding stages do not necessarily occur in a sequential or linear fashion. Instead, they suggest a more dynamic approach, as they urge researchers to integrate, “the explicit coding procedure of the first approach and the style of theory development of the second” (p. 102), allowing flexibility in how theory is constructed and refined. Glaser and Strauss disagreed in their perspectives of how researchers should engage in the data analysis process for developing a grounded theory, but for

the purpose of this research, my data analysis will align with the recommendations of Glaser (Further elaboration in Chapter 3).

Solórzano et al. (2000) utilized a grounded theory approach to complexify our understanding of the racialized experiences of Black collegians on PWI campuses. Solórzano and his colleagues were interested in exploring the impact that racial microaggressions have on the racial climate of college campuses. For their study, the researchers conducted focus group interviews with more than 30 Black collegians across three predominately White college campuses to gain firsthand insights into how often Black students experience microaggressions, the impact of microaggressions, and protective factors for Black students in racially hostile environments. The grounded theory methodology enabled them to develop a framework that elucidates how microaggressions negatively impact campus racial climate for marginalized student groups, and how counter spaces can bolster feelings of belonging and inclusion for Black students.

Hudley and Mallinson (2017) employed grounded theory to illustrate how language and culture can be intertwined into professional learning workshops for K-12 STEM educators. The authors detail how even with the proliferation of culturally responsive teaching practices within education, the STEM field still lags behind other disciplines when it comes to culturally and linguistically inclusive practice (Reddick et al., 2005). Recognizing this gap in the literature and practice, the authors developed and conducted a culturally relevant and linguistically inclusive professional development workshop for 60 STEM educators, supported with surveys, interviews, and focus groups with participants. Their research found that outside of providing teachers with culturally rich curricular materials, a key component of developing culturally responsive STEM teachers is disrupting deficit-based views educators have of nondominant students. The model

that emerged from their research details how STEM educators must learn about the rich and varied identities of their students as a precursor to delivering responsive and inclusive instruction.

A grounded theory approach was also used by McKenna and Millen (2013) to complexify traditional notions of parent involvement within their child's K-12 education. Research consistently shows that students benefit academically when their parents are involved in their education (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004; Wilder, 2014). However, numerous studies have found that educators often only recognize and validate those forms of parental involvement that align with White, middle-class norms (Howard & Reynolds, 2008). As a result, educators tend to overlook or devalue the diverse ways that parents from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds engage in their children's education, leading to misconceptions that these parents are less involved or concerned about their child or children (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Barton et al., 2004; King & Goodwin, 2002). Using a small sample size of eight mothers, the researchers conducted focus groups to develop a new model of parent engagement that highlights the culturally nuanced component of parent engagement for non-dominant parent groups. The new model they derived from their research emphasizes the importance of context in parent involvement in their child's education. Also, the inclusion of parent voices enabled them to develop a framework that centers child wellness as opposed to academic achievement. Each of these scholars I have noted were able to make unique contributions to the field because they did not rely on existing theocratical models, but instead developed insights directly from observations and interviews. Deriving theory from real-world insights enables researchers to develop theories that have practical applications, while still being in conversation with relevant literature.

## **Chapter III**

### **Methodology**

The following methodological description aims to lay out the goals, objectives, and methods that I used to collect and analyze data for my dissertation study. As previously stated, my dissertation examined in-school factors that yield positive academic outcomes for Black students. Additionally, this study explored varied conceptions of Black student success. The following research questions guided this study:

**Q1.** How do different “stakeholders” of schools “deemed” successful for Black students conceive of success for Black students?

**Q2.** What are the some of the essential characteristics, practices, and policies that are most present in schools that effectively educate Black students?

### **Overview of Methods**

My dissertation was a multistakeholder qualitative comparative case study of two K-12 public schools. Using a qualitative case study design increased my understanding of the quantitative data that informed my site selection (see site selection) (Black, 1994). I selected schools for my study based on quantitative measures that demonstrate proficiency in educating Black students. The two schools were also selected based on insights and recommendations provided by Black community members who were familiar with high quality schools for Black students. Qualitative inquiry was essential to this study because, while quantitative metrics can demonstrate that Black students are achieving, they do not explain the factors contributing to these outcomes (Hong & Cross Francis, 2020; Wenzel et al., 2016). Moreover, this research sought to challenge the overreliance on quantitative measures as the sole determinants of student success, and qualitative methodology will allow for a more nuanced exploration of Black student

success beyond mere academic assessment scores. The data collected from these two sites informed the development of a grounded theory on effective schools for Black students that details school factors that foster Black student success.

One of the primary benefits of qualitative methodology is its ability to provide a more holistic perspective of the phenomenon being researched. According to Black (1994), qualitative inquiry is constructive when investigating key variables that produce the outcome being studied. Black (1994) explains the utility of qualitative inquiry in the following excerpt:

There are some subjects that are better investigated using a qualitative approach. These tend to be complex situations where the relevant variables associated with an outcome are not apparent. This type of research aims to increase our understanding of what is going on. (p. 426)

The quantitative data used to select schools that are producing better outcomes for Black students does not reveal how that betterment is generated. In other words, the quantitative data does not reveal key variables that yield the outcomes being investigated. My research aims to provide pragmatic and nuanced insights into why Black students perform better at these sites than Black students in other K-12 locales. A qualitative inquiry approach allowed me to tease out the key factors contributing to these institutions' success. Additionally, qualitative methodology enabled me to explore where and how stakeholders' conceptions of Black student success aligned with and diverged from one another, and how views of student success were conceptualized by various stakeholders. I conducted this study under the premise that because these schools serve students at different levels of development and cognitive functioning they are engaging in distinctive practices that are leading to Black student achievement. Consequently, I employed a comparative case study approach.



A comparative case study inquiry approach was used in this research to understand the variance and similarities across sites where Black students are doing well academically. Kaarbo and Beasley (1999) define a qualitative comparative case study as:

A method of obtaining a "case" or number of "cases" through an empirical examination of a real-world phenomenon within its naturally occurring context, without directly manipulating either the phenomenon or the context. The comparative case study is a comparison of two or more data points (cases) obtained through use of case study method. (p. 372)

Kaarbo and Beasley's (1999) distinction between a traditional case study approach and a comparative case study approach is important for this study because I researched two sites. Moreover, a comparative case study approach is most appropriate for this research because I tried to highlight that there is not a singular way to support the academic achievement of Black student, but rather a multitude of ways to foster Black student success. Sheridan et al. (2011) further emphasizes the utility of this approach:

A case study approach allows the integration of diverse sources of evidence to build a deep within-case understanding of each makerspace. A comparative case study approach, however is particularly suited to analyzing commonalities and differences across multiple sites. (p.509)

This explanation demonstrates why an examination of effective schools for Black student success across two school sites requires a comparative case study approach. A traditional case study would likely require soliciting a more in-depth investigation of how one school has supported the achievement of Black students, but such a design would have led to me making broad generalizations with a limited sample size. Additionally, if I only studied one site the findings would only have implications for Black students at either the secondary or primary level. Students' need evolve with their development; a comparative case study across an elementary and high school allowed me to show how supporting Black student achievement requires age-appropriate supports and strategies.

Another danger of a traditional case study approach when studying Black students is inadvertently contributing to the idea that Black students are a monolith, and that there are one-size-fits-all strategies to increase Black student achievement (Bartolomé, 1994; Nasir, 2011). By investigating multiple school sites, I uncovered a myriad of different practices and policies that still contribute to the academic success of Black students. Another benefit of studying highly effective schools for Black students across multiple sites is the ability to gain a more comprehensive understanding of student success, with specific attention to how Black student success is perceived by various stakeholders. At both sites I was interested in understanding how various stakeholders understood success for Black students and the extent to which this differs because of race.

Comparative case study methodology is intended to provide researchers with a qualitative approach for analyzing "why" and "how" phenomena/processes occur in similar but different cases/situations (Eckstein et al., 1975; Lijphart, 1971). The benefit of using case study methodology in this research is that it allowed me to identify differences, similarities, and patterns across the two sites selected for this study. Moreover, the comparative case design provided me with robust and in-depth understanding of what drives success for Black students at each site. The data collected from these cases informed the development of a grounded theory on effective schools for Black students. Grounded theory methodology seeks to generate theoretical insights that are directly drawn from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). My analytical approach was informed by grounded theory methodology as I engaged constant comparison throughout the data collection process to explore different hypotheses as to why these schools are producing better academic outcomes for Black students. Additionally, grounded theory methodology guided my coding process. Glaser (1978) explains coding as a process that, "gets the analyst off

the empirical level by fracturing the data, then conceptually grouping it into codes that then become the theory which explains what is happening in the data” (p.55). For Glaser, the coding process has two phases: 1) substantive coding which establishes categories and their descriptions and 2) theoretical coding that combines the substantive codes into a theory. This combined approach enables both in-depth exploration of each site as an individual case and the generation of a broader explanatory framework on enhancing Black student achievement.

### *Interviews*

I conducted a total of 8 interviews for my study. Each was an approximately an hour and a half-long, semi-structured, interview. I facilitated interviews with the three educational researchers, the principal at each school site (two in total), and three additional stakeholders (one at Redd, two at McCune) who, while not fitting into predefined stakeholder groups, were included due to their central roles within their respective schools. Creswell (2005) argues that semi-structured interviews are a valuable method for unpacking a phenomenon in an in-depth fashion. Moreover, semi-structured interviews provide a more in-depth examination of the perspective of the individual being interviewed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Education scholars were interviewed individually to ensure their expertise was captured separately, preventing their perspectives from influencing one another. Additionally, because these scholars were not affiliated with a common school site, there was no need to analyze their interactions and engagement in the manner facilitated by the focus groups. Individual interviews were also conducted with principals, complemented by focus groups that included other administrators alongside the principal. This approach was designed to explore each principal’s unique vision for school culture and the strategies they employ to actualize that vision. Understanding the principal’s perspective is critical, as research consistently highlights the principal’s central role

as the primary decision-maker in shaping school climate and culture (Allen et al., 2015; Kelley et al., 2005; Martin, 2009). Siedman (2015) argues that interviews are an effective tool for understanding the first-hand experience of participants in a given study. Moreover, interviewing as an inquiry technique is especially useful for understanding the habits and mindsets that motivate the decisions of the interviewee (Rowley, 2012; Seidman, 2015).

### *Focus Groups*

I also conducted 11 focus group interviews as part of my study. Focus groups were utilized to interview stakeholders (caregivers, students, teachers, school leaders, and educational researchers). Use of focus groups are explained by Lederman (1990) as a:

technique involving the use of in-depth group interviews in which participants are selected because they are a purposive, although not necessarily representative, sampling of a specific population, this group being focused' on a given topic. (p.208)

The primary purpose of this approach is best explained by the following statement from Rabiee (2004), “The main aim [of focus group interviews] is to understand, and explain, the meanings, beliefs, and cultures that influence the feelings, attitudes and behaviors of individuals” (p.655). Additionally, as a single researcher, this method allowed me to speak to more participants within a short time period. For each focus group, I recruited two to five (2 – 5) stakeholders to share their insights and firsthand experiences.

During these focus group interviews, I queried how stakeholders defined student success, the extent to which students being Black influenced that definition, and the key contributors to Black student success on each campus (see Appendix A for protocol). The distinct perspectives and domain-specific knowledge of each stakeholder group contributed to a holistic understanding of what drives Black student success at both sites. While the educational researchers involved in this study were not directly connected to the sites under investigation,

they played a crucial role in responding to the data collected from each site. Drawing upon their extensive experience working with Black students in various contexts, these researchers provided valuable insights and interpretations. Their perspectives served not only to deepen the analysis but also to act as a mechanism for validating the emerging theory. By critically engaging with the data and offering feedback, they functioned as external experts, helping to ensure that the theory was grounded in practical realities and aligned with broader patterns observed in the field. Caregivers were selected for participation on a volunteer basis, while staff members were chosen based on recommendations from the principals, caregivers, and students. A purposive sampling approach was employed to ensure that the selected staff participants were those most capable of addressing the research questions. Student participants were selected based on recommendations from educators at each site.

### *Observations*

The final data collection source for my study was classroom/school site observations. Though typically used in ethnographic research, observations were a valuable tool for understanding how participants in this study exist in the researched environment (Baker, 2006). I spent a total of approximately 100 hours at each site. Each day of observation is supported with field notes to provide additional contextual details for each day of observation (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). While the interviews and focus groups were vital in helping me to understand why these schools foster increased success for Black students, observations were also an essential tool for understanding what these practices look like in real time. McKechnie (2008) describes observations in qualitative research as, “one of the oldest and most fundamental research methods approaches. This approach involves collecting data using one’s senses, especially looking and listening in a systematic and meaningful way” (McKechnie, 2008, p.

573). There is a wealth of literature arguing that observations are an effective instrument for understanding a phenomenon in its natural settings (Baker, 2006; Gorman & Clayton, 2005; Tannenbaum & Spradley, 1980). For the purpose of this study, it was imperative to not just examine the structural policies that generate success for Black students at the K-12 level but also the daily human interactions that create environments that are conducive to the success for Black students.

An adapted version of the TCSJ IMPACT Observation Rubric (see Appendix B) was used in this research to examine and understand classroom practices. The IMPACT program is an accredited K-12 teacher credentialing program in California. Its observational rubric was originally designed as an evaluation tool for observing novice teachers during their first year in the classroom, and has five domains: 1) Create Equitable Community and Culture, 2) Develop and Deliver Integrated Lessons and Units, 3) Plan Informative Assessments and Analyze Student Work to Meet Learning Goals, 4) Engage the Community to Advocate for and Meet the Needs of ALL Students, and 5) Evaluate and Reflect on Your Own Practice. For the purpose of this research, I specifically focused on Domains One and Four. Domain One is relevant to this research because it explicitly looks for the ways teachers get to know their students and incorporate their students identities and backgrounds into their classroom practices. Finally, Domain Four is critical for application in this study because it involves collaboration outside of the traditional school environment on behalf of students. In addition to formal classrooms observations, I also conducted informal observations of each physical school space to observe the overall climate and human interactions in school. As a researcher, engaging in informal observations allowed me to increase my familiarity with each school site and its respective cultures and norms (Astor et al., 2009). The combination of individual interviews, focus groups,

and classroom observations provided a robust account of multiple data points for triangulation purposes, and insights into the unique factors within the learning environment that yield success for Black students. The chart below offers an overview of the primary data collection approaches that were utilized in this research:

Figure 1. Data Collection Approaches

<b>Method</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Avg. Duration</b>	<b>Redd</b>	<b>McCune</b>
<b>Focus Groups</b>	11	1.5 Hours	4 (n.16)	3 (n.10)
<b>One-on-one Interviews</b>	8	1.5 Hours	2	3
<b>Observations</b>	100+ Hours	4.5 Hours	50 Hours +	50 Hours +

### Site Selection

To select schools for this study, I utilized a purposive sampling approach. Purposive sampling was paramount in this study because I was intentionally looking for schools that were producing better outcomes for Black students. Additionally, because I was looking to examine effective schools for Black students, a random selection process would have failed to align with my goals (Sargeant, 2012). I began the selection process by reviewing a data set with all 2045 schools in Los Angeles County. Because Black students are the focus of my study, I then eliminated all schools that did not have a Black student population of at least 40 percent. After eliminating schools without a substantial Black student population, 149 schools remained in my data set. I then eliminated all charter schools from this data set because I am specifically interested in studying traditional K-12 public schools; this left my data set with 29 schools.

I then took this narrowed data set of 29 schools and reviewed their California Dash Board results from the 2018-2019 school year. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this was the most

recently collected school data. The California Dash Board is an online resource that displays how schools across California perform on numerous school quality indicators (*California School Dashboard (CA Dept of Education)*, n.d.). The dashboard's color-coded evaluation system (red-blue) assesses schools on various measures ranging from suspension rates to career and college readiness. For my study, I specifically examined English Language Arts and Mathematics scores. On the California Dashboard, the English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics scores show how students are meeting grade-level standards on statewide assessments. I used these indicators because they revealed how these schools were performing academically.

After reviewing the outcomes for each of the 29 schools, I eliminated 20 schools within the data set because their ELA and math scores were in the bottom two performance levels out of a total of five levels. The nine remaining schools were part of the Los Angeles Unified School District. All but two of these schools ranked at or above average on the Dashboard's performance indicators. The two schools that were not ranked at or above average in ELA and Mathematics remained in the data set because they were ranked at or above average on one of the two indicators. Retaining these schools on my site selection list was done to provide a more extensive set of schools to choose from. While academic assessment measures are useful for understanding how well students are fairing academically, they do not reveal how students experience their daily schooling environment. A wealth of research reveals that good grades alone do not equate to socioemotional wellness for Black students (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Nasir, 2011; Noguera, 2009; Perry & Steele, 2004). Because I insisted on expansive notions of student success for this study, I deemed it imperative to select schools based on performance measures other than academics.



The Los Angeles Unified School District distributes an annual survey titled the School Experience Survey (SES) to solicit feedback from students, parents, and educators about their experiences. The SES assesses three categories: academics, social-emotional learning, and school climate, with responses ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. After reviewing this data set, I found relevant survey responses in the school climate domain within a subsection labeled "connectedness." The connectedness sections listed students responses to statements such as, "adults at this school treat all students with respect, teachers care if I'm absent from school, and the teachers at this school treat students fairly." I then added the SES data into my data set of nine schools to identify: 1) the schools that performed at or above state academic standards, and 2) the schools that scored above district averages on student reported connectedness. The two schools that emerged were McCune High School and Redd Elementary School.

### *McCune High School*

McCune High School was founded in 1982 in Watts, California, approximately seven miles east of downtown Los Angeles. Watts is a predominantly LatinX, low-income urban community; however, the rich history of Black folks in Watts is the primary reason why McCune is what it is today. In the early 1900s, Watts was a working-class community comprised primarily of White railroad workers and their families (Britannica, 2024). As Black folks became aware of opportunities working on the railroad, they began to migrate to Watts during the first wave of the Great Migration (Wilkerson, 2010). By the 1920s, 14% of Watt's population was Black, making it the Blackest neighborhood in all of California. Over the next 20 years, Watts became a predominately Black community, with the second wave of the Great Migration attracting more Black people from states like Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Texas to California, searching for opportunity and an escape from the violence of Jim Crow. As Black

folks arrived in Watts, they relied on all they could—each other—and built strong communal bonds to mitigate the effects of inadequate material resources.

One of the factors that made Watts an attractive destination for Black folks during the 1940s was the plethora of employment possibilities. During the 1940s major metropolitan cities across the country had plentiful industrial job opportunities that Black folks could take advantage of (Trotter, 2019). In Watts, there were also many opportunities for work in the war industry due to World War II. The influx of residents to Watts quickly created a housing issue, which the city responded to by erecting housing projects (Nickerson Gardens and Jordan Downs). The increase of Black residents in Watts also prompted White flight out of Watts, and by the 1960s, the aforementioned projects, along with the neighborhood, were nearly all populated Black folks (Hunt & Ramón, 2010). Similar to what occurred in urban locales across the country during the 1960s, as White folks left the neighborhood, the job opportunities that attracted Black people there in the first place left with them (Rothstein, 2017; Schneider, 2008). Losing the community's economic base inevitably caused more families in Watts to fall below the poverty line. Moreover, White folks leaving Watts lowered the property value in the area, which allowed more low-income Black folks to move to the area.

Black folks in Watts found themselves racially and economically isolated, which began to generate resentment and frustration. Additionally, social services in the region worsened as schools and hospitals deteriorated due to governmental neglect, and incidents of anti-Black police brutality proliferated. The pernicious combination of isolation and maltreatment sparked the Watts Rebellion of 1965 (Horne, 1995). An incident of police brutality erupted into one of the largest social demonstrations in California history, taking the lives of 30 people and causing over \$40 million worth of damage (Levy, 2018). The rebellion is significant to the history of

McCune because, according to the school's principal, this was the impetus for the school's creation. Mr. Smart, the school's current principal shared that after the rebellion, "Sweet" Alice Walker, known as the "matriarch of Watts," held a community event where she got Black parents to sign a petition calling for a well-resourced, high-quality school in Watts. As the story goes, once she had the support of community members, she took her petition to local politicians and governmental officials, and this action eventually resulted in the creation of McCune. Though it took nearly 20 years to see the fruits of Sweet Alice's labor, the seeds planted after the Watts rebellion transformed the future of secondary education in Watts.

When McCune first opened in 1982 it was a predominantly Black campus. As McCune was working to establish itself as a stellar institution of learning, the community of Watts unfortunately began to encounter new problems. In the 1980s, Watts became known as a neighborhood with rampant gang violence and a bustling underground economy. It is estimated that from 1989 through 2005, more 500 homicides occurred in the community of Watts. Crime and violence often spur from desperation. The violence and crime in Watts during the 1980s and 1990s are directly correlated to the racial and economic isolation inflicted upon this community over time. Placing any group into a community with low-quality, congested housing, inadequate social services, and scant employment opportunities inevitably leads to people in that community engaging in desperate behavior, such as participation in the underground economy (Wilson, 2012). Over time, the rampant gang violence, poverty, and isolation caused many Blacks to leave the city for other parts of Southern California or other states. As Black folks left Watts, LatinX folks came in, and by 2000, 61% of Watts residents were LatinX. Today, Watts is no longer predominantly Black, and as the racial makeup of Watts changed, so did the racial makeup of McCune. McCune is currently home to 1377 students across ninth through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Of those

1377 students, the majority are LatinX, and 41% (570) of their student body are Black, giving them the second largest Black population amongst high schools in LAUSD. Though the school and community are predominately LatinX, the administration at McCune shared they intentionally maintain a strong Black presence at the school. In the school's 40 years, they have had four principals, all of whom have been Black. Their current administration team has only one non-Black person, and their staff is over 25% Black. McCune remains a bastion of Blackness for not only Watts, but all of Los Angeles, as the city continues to lose its Black presence.

Watts is still a low-income neighborhood, with over half the population living below the poverty line. According to available data, the median household income in Watts is approximately \$30,000, which is \$20,000 less than the median average in Los Angeles County. Therefore, it is not surprising that 90% of McCune's student body is considered socioeconomically disadvantaged. Despite having a paucity of economic resources compared to those of affluent schools in Los Angeles, McCune is still known for its stellar academic offerings. The school boasts a 63% proficiency rate in reading/language arts, surpassing the California state average of 47%. In mathematics, 27% of students achieve proficiency, aligning with the state average of 33%. The school maintains an impressive graduation rate of 98%, exceeding the state average of 87%. McCune proudly sends more Black students to UC schools than any other high school in California. Additionally, it maintains a community reputation for producing exemplary students. I share this information to provide essential insight into why McCune was selected for this study and contextualize the setting and time in which this research occurred.

*Redd Elementary School*

Redd Elementary was founded in 1943 in the Baldwin Hills section of Los Angeles. The Baldwin Hills neighborhood is known across the country for being home to the Black bourgeoisie of Los Angeles. In fact, for decades, the Baldwin Hills area was known as the Black Beverly Hills (Hunt & Ramón, 2010). Though this area is presently known as a middle-class Black enclave, its origins shed light on the struggles of Black folks in Los Angeles seeking access to affluent neighborhoods with crucial social institutions such as high-quality schools.

Due to redlining, Baldwin Hills was an exclusively White community well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Black folks did not reside in Baldwin Hills until the 1950s after the Supreme Court outlawed restrictive covenants in 1948, slowly allowing affluent Black folks to move into the area (Bobo et al., 2000). At the time, regardless of socioeconomic status, Black Angelenos primarily resided in South Los Angeles, which was known for low-quality housing, schools, and healthcare facilities (Hunt & Ramón, 2010). Therefore, Black folks of means who were moving to Baldwin Hills were seeking safe communities with high-quality public services. In 1962, the persistence of Black parents led to the integration of Redd Elementary. Integrating the community and Redd elementary was the beginning of the end for White Baldwin Hills.

As always, the arrival of Black folks to Baldwin Hills meant the departure of White folks. The 1965 Watts riot accelerated White flight from Baldwin Hills as White residents sought as much distance from Black folks as possible (Avila, 2006). As White people left the community, more affluent Black folks from across the country arrived; it is estimated that between 1950 and 1971, 70% of the White residents in Baldwin Hills sold their homes. The change in the community's racial makeup consequently led to Redd Elementary becoming a predominately Black school. As Redd Elementary's Black population increased, Black folks from surrounding low-income areas attempted to send their children to Redd Elementary in hopes they would

receive a better education than their neighborhood schools. This is important to note because, though Baldwin Hills is an area replete with resources, many of the students at Redd Elementary are still socioeconomically disadvantaged because Black folks from surrounding areas continue to send their children to there.

Redd Elementary is currently home to nearly 500 students across kindergarten through fifth grade. The Baldwin Hills community remains one of the Blackest communities in all of Los Angeles, and Redd Elementary is amongst the Blackest schools in LAUSD, with nearly 80% of their student body identifying as Black. Though Baldwin Hills is among the country's wealthiest majority Black communities, 80% of their student body is considered socioeconomically disadvantaged. Redd Elementary is known as one of the best primary schools in the region, particularly for Black students, because of its combination of rigorous academic standards and culturally attuned education. In 2015, Redd became an LAUSD pilot school, granting them autonomy over curriculum and allowing them to tailor their educational services to their students. Within five years of being a pilot school, Redd became a California distinguished school and a shining example of what is possible for Black students when given culturally responsive education. Redd Elementary stays true to its Black identity, proudly displaying a Sankofa bird as their mascot, along with a staff that is 50% Black and an administration team comprised solely of Black women. Similar to the previous section on McCune, this information provides a foundational understanding of the site that is crucial for unpacking this research's findings.

### **Participant Selection**

This section outlines the formal participant selection process for interviews conducted at both school sites. The individuals described here represent the core participants of this research,

selected through intentional and structured recruitment methods. While the study also incorporates a wealth of insights and data from additional stakeholders at both sites, their inclusion was not part of a formal selection process. Instead, their perspectives and quotes were collected through observations and spontaneous interactions, adding depth and context to the findings presented in this research.

**School Leaders:** Two separate interviews were conducted to gather school leaders' perceptions of Black student success. At McCune High School, Mr. Smart, the principal, was the sole participant in a one-on-one semi-structured interview, as the two assistant principals invited were unable to participate due to prior commitments. At Redd High School, a focus group interview was conducted with three school leaders-- Principal Dr. Canady, Assistant Principal Mrs. Curry, and Magnet Coordinator Ms. Jones. Although two additional school leaders at Redd were invited, scheduling conflicts prevented their participation (see Figure 2).

**Teachers:** Focus group interviews were conducted at both sites to examine teachers' perceptions of Black student success. At McCune, an open email invitation was sent to all teachers, resulting in two volunteers for the focus group. Similarly, at Redd, an email invitation led to the recruitment of four teachers who participated in a focus group discussion. The decision to engage teachers separately from school leaders was intentional, reflecting the distinct, micro-level perspective teachers possess through their direct and daily interactions with students (see Figure 3).

**Students:** At McCune, a focus group interview with Black students was conducted to understand their conceptions of success and explore their experiences at McCune. Five rising seniors participated, selected through recommendations from teachers and administrators based on criteria such as leadership roles, academic proficiency, extracurricular involvement, strong

peer relationships, and a minimum of two years' attendance at the school. Seven students meeting these criteria were invited, and five agreed to participate, providing valuable insights into student experiences and perceptions. Students at Redd participated in a focus group interview but were solely queried about their experiences at Redd, and were selected similar to the criteria for students at McCune. Six students from 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade participated, selected through recommendations from teachers and administrators based on criteria such as leadership roles, academic proficiency, strong peer relationships, and a minimum of two years' attendance at the school. I chose upper primary grade students because I felt they would provide the most purposeful data for this research based on their cognitive development (see Figure 4).

Caregivers: At both sites caregivers were engaged through focus group interviews to examine their understandings of Black student success and gather their perspectives and experiences with their child's school. Recruitment at McCune occurred during an Open House event, where Black parents were invited to participate, resulting in initial interest from seven parents, three of whom ultimately participated. At Redd, recruitment took place during a virtual PTA meeting attended by over 25 parents, where three caregivers agreed to participate in the study (see Figure 5).

Scholars Three nationally recognized scholars, Dr. Na'ilah Suad Nasir, Dr. Tyrone Howard, and Dr. Shaun Harper, were included in the study to provide expert insights into the intersections of race and education. There was a rigorous selection process to identify educational researchers for this study. Each of the scholars included in this study are former presidents of the American Educational Research Association, which was critical for their selection because it demonstrates their roles as leaders within the field of education. Additionally, each is a member of the National Academy of Education, meaning they have been



recognized and celebrated by their peers for outstanding contributions to the field. I consider these scholars key stakeholders due to their distinct roles and their significant impact on K-12 education. All three are highly accomplished their esteemed positions within the field allow them to influence K-12 schools in multiple ways. While educational researchers are often perceived as disconnected from practice, these scholars' unique roles as public intellectuals enable them to bridge the gap between research and practice in ways that many academics cannot. Their perspectives were particularly relevant for addressing issues of racial inequity and advancing the educational success of Black students (see Figure 6).

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis is defined by Mihas (2019) as, “the analysis of textual, visual, or audio data—covers a spectrum from confirmation to exploration” (p.3). Critical for qualitative research, data analysis allows the researcher to make sense of their findings in a rigorous and systematic way (Seers, 2012). The following paragraph is a detailed explanation of the iterative data analysis process that I used for my study.

Each interview and focus group was recorded on a laptop with the consent of the research participants. Audio interviews and focus groups were all recorded via Otter, which provided the audio and written transcripts of the interviews or focus groups. After each recording session, I reviewed the transcripts to prevent the misinterpretation or misrepresentation of any of my participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). NVivo transcription software was used through the duration of this study to code and analyze data.

In their original conception of grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss (1967) emphasized the use of constant comparison as the foundation of data analysis, a process known as comparative analysis (Heath & Cowley, 2004). In grounded theory qualitative inquiry, data collection and

analysis occur concurrently (Heath & Cowley, 2004; Oktay, 2012); as I collected my data, I then developed categories by comparing them, and integrating new data to determine whether it fit within existing categories or warranted the creation of new ones. Because grounded theory methodology requires researchers to constantly check their own beliefs and evolving ideas, analytic memos were paramount to my research process (Ravitch & Carl, 2015; Rogers, 2018). Analytical memos are a central feature of grounded theory because it helps the researcher document the analytic process, contributing to the transparency and rigor of theoretical development (Birks & Mills, 2015). As concepts emerged from my comparative analysis, I wrote memos to reflect on the evolving data, capturing how these ideas and categories developed into a coherent theory.

In grounded theory methodology the coding process consists of two stages: substantive coding and theoretical coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; R. Rogers, 2018). Substantive coding was used to develop concepts from within the data, and it included two phases: open coding and selective coding (Birks & Mills, 2015; Heath & Cowley, 2004).

### *Open Coding*

In this phase, I carefully examined the data line by line, creating categories based on what stood out. Santos et al. (2018) suggest that in this stage the newly minted categories are compared with one another to determine whether they fit together or need to be grouped separately. As more data is collected, these categories grow, become more complex, and eventually evolve into broader meta-constructs. As these constructs take shape, the relationships between the categories become clearer, helping to explain the phenomenon under investigation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; D. Walker & Myrick, 2006). Throughout this analytical process, Glaser (1967) suggests that researchers continuously ask three key questions: “What is the main concern

of the participants? What is really happening in the data? What category does this incident indicate?” (p.18).

### *Selective Coding*

In the second phase of substantive coding, the focus shifts to condensing and refining the data (Glaser, 1978). Selective coding begins by identifying core categories that emerged during the open coding phase, which have been recognized as key concepts (Mihas, 2019; Seers, 2012). Once these concepts have been identified, the researcher engages in a more focused coding process, determining what data fits into the central categories (Birks & Mills, 2015; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This narrowing of focus helps refine and clarify the relationships between the categories, and any data that does not fit into the core categories is set aside. Selective coding is critical in grounded theory research because, as central themes emerge, they guide the questions posed to participants, allowing for deeper exploration of the emerging concepts (Santos et al., 2018). The goal of selective coding is to reach theoretical saturation (Glaser, 1978)—the point at which no new information or categories emerge, indicating that the categories are fully developed and no further data collection is required.

After conducting both stages of substantive coding I transitioned my analysis into theoretical coding. Theoretical coding occurs when researchers explore the relationships between the substantive concepts identified during substantive coding (Birks & Mills, 2015; Heath & Cowley, 2004). In this phase, the focus was on developing a coherent theoretical framework by explaining how the various concepts interrelated and influenced the outcome being studied. The theory "emerges" when the researcher has identified how these categories coexist and interact with one another (Glaser, 1978). This new framework was then compared to existing literature to

determine whether the newly developed theory supported, extended, or challenged existing knowledge.

## **Limitations**

As emphasized throughout this proposal, there is an urgent need for empirically grounded approaches to enhancing Black student success within the educational literature. This study was intentional in that it sought to advance our understanding of how schools can better serve Black students by developing a new theory of school efficacy specifically for Black students that incorporates the perspectives of key stakeholders within schools. The theory that emerges from this research serves a dual purpose: as an analytical tool for examining why non-dominant students perform as they do in certain school environments, and as a practical guide offering educators actionable strategies to improve the school experiences of Black students. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study, as they inevitably influenced the research outcomes.

Examining how all racialized student groups are impacted by practices of these school sites was beyond the scope of this research. I was specifically looking at what drives success for Black students at each of the sites. Additionally, for feasibility purposes, both sites in this study were (and are still) located the same school district in Los Angeles. The final limitation worth mentioning is that I examined school efficacy for Black students and was interested in exploring this phenomenon within a specific context—a context in which Black students were at least 40% of the school population. I recognize that creating effective schools for Black students may differ for Black students in predominantly White or Latinx schools, rural environments, or in different locales across the country, but because of the highly segregated nature of U.S. public schools, most Black students in the United States attend urban schools predominately made up of students

of color (Orfield & Jarvie, 2020). Therefore, I purposefully looked for schools with a substantial Black population in urban locales because they most closely resemble the learning environment of most Black students across the country.

### **Contextual Background and Community Histories**

Before diving into the findings, it is pertinent that I contextualize the data derived from this research by providing a brief breakdown of the histories of the communities in which these schools sit and how these school sites came to be. I begin with a broad overview of the historical hardships faced by Black students in Los Angeles, and then narrow my focus by providing a background of the histories of the two schools in this study and the communities in which they are located. It is difficult to grasp the significance of this research without an in-depth understanding of the sociopolitical trends and generational hardships and thriving that shape these settings.

Black folks first came to Los Angeles en masse at the dawn of the 20th century, fleeing from the racial hostility of the South and drawn by the prospect of new opportunities (Campbell, 2016; Wilkerson, 2010). According to U.S. Census data there were approximately 2000 Black people living in Los Angeles in 1900, and by 1930 that number had jumped significantly to nearly 40,000. However, this influx of Black residents revealed the depths and complexity of White rage. Newly arrived Black Angelenos began to encounter formal and informal policies that infringed upon the rights of Black citizens, such as redlining, which relegated Black folks to overcrowded communities with meager resources and low-quality social institutions (Rothstein, 2017). The local government in Los Angeles frequently overlooked and, in some cases, refused to acknowledge, the substandard living conditions in Black neighborhoods, only furthering their marginalization in the region. Rampant neglect of the needs of Black citizens affected all aspects of life for Black folks and dramatically limited their educational access and opportunity (Hunt &

Ramón, 2010). Despite the growing racial hostility and segregation in the region, Black folks continued to arrive in droves because of the industrial growth that provided employment opportunities not afforded to Black folks in the South. By 1940, there were more than 60,000 Black Angelenos, a substantial jump from the 38,000 Black Angelenos just a decade prior (PBS *The Great Migration*, 2012). In short, despite its flaws, many Black people deemed major metropolitan cities such as Los Angeles as providing a dramatic improvement in the quality of life for Black folks compared to the South (Lemann, 2011).

After World War II ended in 1945, the Black population in Los Angeles continued to rise, but the impact of residential restrictions codified in the 1920s persisted, shaping Black life for decades to come. In the 1940s Black Angelenos primarily resided in low-income communities across South and East Los Angeles, and Black students attended multiracial (Black and LatinX) under-resourced schools (Orr & Rogers, 2011). Though school segregation was outlawed in the 1954 with the passing of *Brown v. Board*, Black students in Los Angeles remained in racially isolated schools well into the 1960s (Caughey, 1967). Federal policies enabled White residents to flee working class communities in Los Angeles, and restrictive housing policies coupled with vigilante violence forced Black folks into designated parts of the city. These restrictions ensured that schools servicing students of color were woefully underfunded; leading to low quality facilities, inadequate resources, and often times overworked and underqualified school staff (Orr & Rogers, 2011). In the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as the student population in the Los Angeles Unified School District continued to diversify with a growing increase in non-White students (Black, Latinx, and AAPI communities), White people again sought separation (Orr & Rogers, 2011). As White students left the district, so did resources, furthering the educational inequities for Black students and other students of color

across Los Angeles (Schneider, 2008). As school populations became increasingly non-White across the city, schools were increasingly neglected and began to function as tools for stratification rather than education.

The 1980s was the high point for the Black population in Los Angeles in terms of numbers, with approximately half a million Black folks residing in the city (Bobo et al., 2000). However, in Los Angeles, the 1980s was also the height of the crack epidemic and the proliferation of gang violence (Ramsey, 2023). As crime rates in Los Angeles rose, anti-Black sentiments intensified, with Black youth unjustly becoming scapegoats for the city's growing dangers (Stevenson, 2013). Sojoyner (2016) explains how in response to the social-political milieu pathologizing urban Black youth as criminals in the 1980s, schools began to function as sites of containment for Black youth as opposed to education, hence the beginning of the Los Angeles School Police Department in 1988. The allocation of dollars toward school police, who were disproportionately present in predominantly Black schools across the district, provides insights into district priorities at the time. LAUSD was not spending inordinate amounts of money to improve school resources or hire high-quality staff; they were investing in containment techniques instead.

In the 1990s as a result of the increasing violence and police presence in Black schools along with low-quality social institutions in Black communities, many Black folks began to leave the city of Los Angeles for other parts of Southern California or to migrate back to the South (Hunt & Ramón, 2010). In the 1980s and 1990s, the immigrant population from Mexico and Central America began to surge (Bobo et al., 2000). Over the next 40 years, the Black population has steadily declined to approximately 350,000 Black people, according to the 2020 Census, and the Latinx population has boomed to more than 1.5 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Despite

this steady decline in the Black population, Los Angeles is still home to one of the largest Black student populations in the country. As of 2024, there were nearly 40,000 Black students within the city of Los Angeles enrolled in the Los Angeles Unified School District and the majority of those Black students attend under-resourced, racially isolated schools in low-income communities (LAUSD, 2024). Additionally, though Black students are in small numbers in Los Angeles, they are over-represented in nearly all academic markers of academic failure (California Dashboard, 2019). This background information is presented to demonstrate that though Black folks have been a part of the fabric of Los Angeles for 100 years, Los Angeles has routinely failed to meet the academic needs of Black students. A research project of this nature is critical to increase the efficacy of Los Angeles schools in educating Black students.

As a Black man from the Los Angeles area, when I entered graduate school at UCLA, I wanted to conduct research on Black students but struggled greatly to find Black spaces in the region. LAUSD is now 75% Latinx; therefore, many of the school spaces I entered did not have a substantial number of Black folks (LAUSD, 2022). Additionally, the schools where I did find a large number of Black students were struggling institutions where Black students encountered many of the same obstacles impeding the success of Black students across the country. My dissertation was inspired by a search for schools in Los Angeles where Black students were doing well.

## **Participants**

Figure 2. Stakeholder Group 1: School Leaders



<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Site</b>	<b>Years at Site</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Gender</b>
<b>Mr. Smart</b>	Principal	McCune	8 years	Black	Male
<b>Dr. Canady</b>	Principal	Redd	7 years	Black	Female
<b>Mrs. Curry</b>	Assistant Principal	Redd	1 year	Black	Female
<b>Ms. Jones</b>	Magnet Coordinator	Redd	7 years	Black	Female

Figure 3. Stakeholder Group 2: Teachers

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Site</b>	<b>Years at Site</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Gender</b>
<b>Ms. House</b>	2 <sup>nd</sup> grade teacher	Redd	2 years	Black	Female
<b>Ms. King</b>	1 <sup>st</sup> grade teacher	Redd	7 years	Black	Female
<b>Ms. Styles</b>	3 <sup>rd</sup> grade teacher	Redd	7 years	Black	Female
<b>Mrs. Spalding</b>	4 <sup>th</sup> grade teacher	Redd	6 years	Black	Female
<b>Ms. Toussaint</b>	Foreign Language teacher	McCune	9 years	White	Female
<b>Ms. London</b>	10 <sup>th</sup> grade ELA teacher	McCune	3 years	Black	Female

Figure 4. Stakeholder Group 3: Black Students

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Site</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Position</b>
<b>Jamal</b>	Student	McCune	11 <sup>th</sup>	Black	Male
<b>Iyana</b>	Student	McCune	11 <sup>th</sup>	Black	Female
<b>Raheem</b>	Student	McCune	11 <sup>th</sup>	Black	Male
<b>Tim</b>	Student	McCune	11 <sup>th</sup>	Black	Male
<b>Christina</b>	Student	McCune	11 <sup>th</sup>	Black	Female
<b>Nate</b>	Student	Redd	4 <sup>th</sup>	Black	Male
<b>Aniya</b>	Student	Redd	4 <sup>th</sup>	Black	Female
<b>Shaun</b>	Student	Redd	5 <sup>th</sup>	Black	Male
<b>Audrey</b>	Student	Redd	5 <sup>th</sup>	Black	Female
<b>Orlando</b>	Student	Redd	4 <sup>th</sup>	Black	Male
<b>Mariah</b>	Student	Redd	5 <sup>th</sup>	Black	Female

Figure 5. Stakeholder Group 4: Caregivers

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Site</b>	<b>Number of Children at Site</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Gender</b>
<b>Tameka</b>	Caregiver	McCune	3	Black	Female
<b>Robert</b>	Caregiver	McCune	1	Black	Male
<b>Lori</b>	Caregiver	McCune	2	Black	Female
<b>David</b>	Caregiver	Redd	3	Black	Male
<b>Jeanine</b>	Caregiver	Redd	1	Black	Female
<b>Dawna</b>	Caregiver	Redd	1	Black	Female

Figure 6. Stakeholder Group 5: Scholars

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Worksite</b>	<b>Years In Field</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Gender</b>
<b>Dr. Tyrone Howard</b>	Education Professor	UCLA	30+	Black	Male
<b>Dr. Na'ilah Nasir</b>	Educational Researcher	Spencer Foundatio n	30+	Black	Female
<b>Dr. Shaun Harper</b>	Education & Business Professor	USC	20+	Black	Male

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCEPTIONS OF BLACK STUDENT SUCCESS

**Q1.** How do different “stakeholders” of schools “deemed” successful for Black students conceive of success for Black students?

#### Introduction

Our current understanding of student success is primarily derived from school systems conceptions (e.g., grades, test scores, and other achievement metrics), with little attention paid to how caregivers and students perceive success in schools. An in-depth review of educational literature reveals that White supremacist ideologies played a key role in defining student success by academic metrics, as these metrics were used as pseudo-evidence of Black intellectual inferiority. For decades a successful student has been typified as an individual who performs above average on standardized assessments and has a high-grade point average. This narrow framing of student success has ignored the distinct experiences of racialized students in schools and how race and racism may impact formulations of success. In a racialized society, it is plausible that success may be understood differently for Black students than it is for White students.

Schools in the United States standardize Whiteness; hence, our understanding of success is shrouded in this social construct. A host of research suggests that Black students have distinct experiences in school that vary compared to their peers (Bottiani et al., 2016; Edwards, 2021; Harper, 2021). Additionally, a significant body of research details the unique purpose that education had had historically in the lives of Black people in the United States (Anderson, 1988; Du Bois, 1903; Givens, 2023; Walker, 1996). These two bodies of literature underpin my second research question, which explores the unique ways different stakeholders perceive student success and the extent to which success for Black students may be markedly different

from that of their peers. Universal constructs of student success are invalid without a universal perspective on the purpose of schools, and universal experiences in school. My research suggests that both school sites' success in educating Black students partially stems from their ability to navigate multiple, and sometimes conflicting, conceptualizations of success held by various stakeholders. These findings raise critical questions about whether public institutions, operating within broader systems of inequality and oppression, can fully embrace and embody emancipatory notions of success.

The primary focus of this chapter is to illustrate the convergences and divergences in how key stakeholders at McCune and Redd conceptualize student success and how Blackness informs their understandings of student success. In the following section, I will detail how each stakeholder group (administrators, teachers, Black students, Black parents, and education scholars) understand and describes success for Black students. The stakeholders included in this research were selected based on a combination of volunteers and recommendations provided by other research participants. The findings are not separated by site to provide a more extensive exploration within each stakeholder group—school leaders, teachers, Black students, and parent/caregivers. (For an explanation of how stakeholder groups were selected see participant selection chapter 2)

### **School Leaders:**

*Redd: Principal Dr. Canady, Assistant Principal Mrs. Curry, and Magnet Coordinator Ms. Jones*

*McCune: Principal Mr. Smart*

It is vital to interrogate school leaders' perceptions of student success because it has a tremendous impact on the structuring of school spaces. Due to school leaders' positionality as primary decision makers within schools, daily policies, practices, and procedures likely reflect

their beliefs about what students require to be successful. Our focus group interviews with school leaders at both sites began by asking participants to describe students on their respective campuses whom they would characterize as successful. Mr. Smart, the principal at McCune, described students who had a turbulent start to high school, but during their matriculation through MHS<sup>4</sup> demonstrated growth and resilience. For instance, in the following statement, Mr. Smart describes what he termed a successful student from MHS:

This particular kid really had a hard time freshman year, like, multiple fails, repeating classes. And then the light bulb clicked, right. And so, one thing about dealing with kids you never know when the light will go off right. When he did that, he started to flourish. He's not getting in trouble; he started doing his work because he realized his why... I think that's the piece that now he's successful.

While Mr. Smart's perspective on student success being tied to growth, maturation, and the light going on aligns with some normative conceptualizations of good grades and appropriate behavior. Mr. Smart's description of the aforementioned student highlights the value this school leader places on growth and perseverance in his description of student success. Mr. Smart talked about how there are hundreds of students he has encountered in his time at MHS who did not have academic or behavior struggles, but he chose to highlight this student because of his unconventional trajectory and his resilience to ultimately realize his why. For Mr. Smart, perseverance is an integral attribute of successful students which he further expounded on:

I think one of the key elements that we're trying to teach students is that power of perseverance. You're going to have struggles, right? Things are going to be difficult, right? How you react to those difficult situations is going to define you. And so therefore, when you do hit the wall, which is going to happen many times in life, do you get back up dust yourself off, or do you curl up into your shell? Failure is a learning experience. And so that's a recipe for success and for anyone, but especially, let's do it here.

Here, Mr. Smart seems to suggest that he does not see failure as the antithesis of success, but rather a necessary step toward reaching success for many students. In the last line of the excerpt,

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<sup>4</sup> MHS is an abbreviation of McCune High School

Mr. Smart says, “let’s do it here.” Because the principal views failure as an integral part of students’ academic journey, he wants to ensure that McCune is the type of environment that equips students with the requisite tools to be undeterred by failure. As previously mentioned, because of the power Mr. Smart harbors at MHS, his beliefs about students’ success are reflected throughout the school environment. My research found that MHS students are constantly encouraged to challenge themselves academically by taking more challenging and rigorous courses, which sometimes results in failure. Still, the school provides students with support and reminds them that failure is not always as a bad thing. Mr. Smart explained that many of his teachers try to, “teach students how to fail,” because they believe these skills will benefit students in the long run. Seeing that MHS is a secondary school, much of Mr. Smart’s discussion of characteristics of student success centered on life attributes that will benefit students even after they have graduated from McCune.

School leaders at Redd Elementary shared similar student profiles when providing their descriptions of successful students. Like Mr. Smart, when asked to describe a successful student at Redd, all the school leaders that I spoke to described students who initially, “struggled” when they arrived at Redd. The assistant principal Mrs. Curry described a student who was a victim of sexual assault, and who struggled behaviorally when she first started at Redd. With the help of mental health professionals, she has been able to identify triggers and supports that have enabled her to function to her highest capabilities at school. Dr. Canady, the principal at Redd, described another student who experienced houselessness and a great deal of personal instability, resulting in who she described as a “very angry child.” She detailed a myriad of verbal altercations the student had with peers and teachers that often led to the student being put out of class. Dr. Canady deemed this student a success, however, because over time, with the help of school

personnel the student found ways to “manage her emotions and become a valued member of the school community.” While school leaders at both sites talked about the importance of growth and resilience in relation to student success, for the leaders at Redd, perseverance, as opposed to responses to failure, was also connected to better understandings of self. Redd’s leaders connect students’ growth as primarily based on their ability to regulate their own emotions and communicate their needs in ways that are developmentally appropriate for elementary age students. For the leaders at McCune, growth is connected to students’ ability to learn valuable lessons from failure that can help them in their future endeavors.

Outside of their shared focus on students’ personal growth and development, Redd and MHS school leaders all viewed academic proficiency as a core part of student success, but not its determining or most salient characteristic. As explained previously, Redd is known for its innovative Afro-centric approach to teaching and learning. However, Redd school leaders believe it is equally important for students to demonstrate a strong command of academic content. The subsequent statement from Principal Canady reveals the importance of academic proficiency in relation to how she defines student success:

I've shared with teachers, staff, community, many times, our stuff can be blackity BLACK BLACK BLACK and our babies can feel great, but if they're not showing that they're reading and can engage in mathematics and show their competencies, on the academic measures that, you know, everyone else looks at, then it's, it's not for not...But we're in the same boat as everybody else and that we're still part of the narrative of Black babies not achieving and our children absolutely can.

While Dr. Canady recognizes the importance of students experiencing a holistic and self-affirming education, she also suggests that students must still produce strong academic outcomes. She was clear that successful students earn good grades. However, she also suggested that Black students’ academic outcomes have implications that extend beyond the individual and impact the collective. Dr. Canady’s belief that Black students’ individual outcomes contribute to



a broader narrative on Black student achievement indicates that Black students carry a communal responsibility in educational spaces. During my data analysis I began to wonder the extent to which Black students are aware of how their individual academic performances contribute to the broader narrative of Black student achievement? And does awareness of the communal implications of Black students' individual academic performance harm or help Black students in school?

Though Dr. Canady was not asked specifically about Black students, her responses to questions about student success reflected her student body. Throughout the entirety of our interview, school leaders at Redd grounded their ideas of success in Blackness. When asked what makes a student successful, Mrs. Curry simply replied, "For me, it's that they know who they are." When urged to expound she shared:

For me, (success) means to go back to the beginning, to go back to who your ancestors are, what greatness you come from, how, how we were the first people on Earth. We built the first universities, you know, we go back and this is the stuff that we teach, and this is what I think I believe is most important because you have to understand that if you're just watching TV or if you live in a depressed community and you don't see these things, you don't really know who you are and what your what your greatness is, if you don't have people at home that feel that way.

According to Mrs. Curry, Black students' success is inextricably tied to their racial and cultural identity. Her explanation of what it means for a Black student to know who they are did not involve their interests or emotions, but instead an in-depth understanding of and appreciation for the collective history of those racialized as Black. She believes that if Black students know the brilliance and perseverance Black folks have displayed for generations, they will be inspired to adopt those same attributes. For the leaders that I spoke with, the recipe for success at Redd is simple: Give Black students high-quality teaching and curriculum that affirms Black students

racial and cultural identity, and the possibilities are limitless. In the following statement, Dr.

Canady explained how success is fostered for Black students at Redd:

We have to do the work that we do for our babies where they're seeing themselves in that just deep sense of affirmation, but also being tied to, they've got to be able to leave here with just these fundamental skills in place, they need to be able to compete and get into wherever they need to go after this, and those expectations for academics, can be there, while they're getting all of those things they need from an identity standpoint.

Aligned with Mrs. Curry, Dr. Canady asserts that developing successful Black students requires educators to positively contribute to Black students' identity development. According to the school leader participants in this study, Black students need strong core content mastery but must also possess a strong sense of who they are. It was clear in my observations and conversations that the educators at Redd do not believe there is a singular way for students to view their Blackness, however they do believe that students need to view their Blackness as a source of strength and not a hinderance in order to be successful.

School leaders at Redd also believe that critical thinking is a requisite attribute of successful Black students. Within K-12 education, critical thinking is typically conceptualized as a student's ability to assess information and arrive at informed conclusions (Dewey, 1902). For school leaders at Redd, critical thinking has a specific social-justice orientation, wherein students are encouraged to analyze and evaluate information in relation to issues of race, poverty, gender, and other bases for inequities. During my observation at Redd, I was told that critical thinking is taught from a social justice perspective to give Black students the ability to interrogate societal inequities and advocate for change. From the time students enter Redd, they are provided with school curriculum grounded in social justice criticality and are constantly encouraged to make connections between the curriculum and their lives. So, while this critical thinking may begin within the context of school curriculum, it is designed to evolve into a questioning of life beyond

schooling. During my interview with school leaders, when we first broached the topic of critical thinking, several leaders harped on the importance of questioning for Black students because the world will “lie to them” as one leader stated. Ms. Jones explained why Redd emphasizes critical thinking:

And that's one of the things that we do at Redd, is that we teach critical thinking, what if I'm not giving you proper information? What if you can find something that says, I'm not speaking truth? What if there's a book that you're reading is not speaking the truth to you? You've got to know. So, we start training them early for experiences beyond our beautiful pod, because that's what we are and we're, we're beautiful pod, where children grow.

The perspective on critical thinking from Ms. Jones runs counter to traditional understandings of critical thinking at most schools. Ms. Jones’s orientation toward critical thinking suggests that Black students need to question the information they receive in school curricula. She views questioning knowledge as key for Black students’ success because the information students often receive in school emerges in ways that do not fully account for Black experiences and insights. Ms. Jones’s use of the word “training” struck me as odd and when I queried what she meant by the term, she explained that RES<sup>5</sup>’s goal is to prepare the next generation of “change agents”.

Ms. Jones then explained her idea of change agents:

They are my retirement policy, to remove this power, the unyielding power that our dominant culture, our White supremacy society has established and never got rid of. We still have the duty to let these babies know that they are still a part of this world, and they can begin the chain of changemakers, they're the ones.

The leaders at Redd believe that their students can one day become “change agents” who will transform the social and economic realities they were born into, but in order to do so they need to reject conventional thinking and think critically. The following statement from Mrs. Curry builds upon this belief in the importance of critical thinking:

We have to provide students with opportunities to think for themselves, that critical thinking can carry on into other areas of life outside of what's in the textbook. You need

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<sup>5</sup> RES is an abbreviation of Redd Elementary School

to see the world for yourself. So, success looks like students being able to critically think. I think that if we provide them with those skills, but also provide them with, with standards-based activities, that they can connect to their own lives.

Critical thinking is not just an academic imperative at Redd, but a life skill. As Ms. Curry explained, developing critical thinkers begins with generating epistemic skepticism and ideally expands to an internal criticality of the world. Ms. Curry emphasizes that Black students need to see the world for themselves, suggesting that the school curriculum and society will present the world in a manner that educators consider to be untrue or unjust. Redd leadership was clear that they prepare Black students differently than they are traditionally educated at other schools because they want Black students to feel empowered to do create meaningful societal change. The school leaders at Redd proudly recounted stories of former Redd students who matriculated to middle school and returned to tell stories about having to “check their teacher,” because they do not know what they're talking about. For Redd leadership, this is a telling sign of an adept critical thinker because such a student does not passively accept information because an authority figure issued it to them but is constantly questioning any and all information they receive.

"I intentionally refrained from mentioning race at the beginning of the focus group discussion with school leaders. My goal was to assess whether and how their conceptions of student success evolved once race was introduced into the conversation. However, before I could even broach the topic of race, the school leaders at Redd leaned heavily into the salience of race in their conceptions of student success, primarily because their student body is predominately Black. The perspectives of Redd leadership are worth noting, because they reveal that the school leaders' default or instinctual thinking around students at their school focuses on Black students. Later in our interviews, school leaders were asked to specifically explain the extent to which

Blackness impacts their understanding of success. Leaders at Redd shared that they had been thinking of Black students the entire time, and they do see many of those attributes of success as unique to Black students. Academic proficiency was the only attribute they identified to be necessary for all successful students.

Conversely, Mr. Smart did not explicitly discuss race or Blackness in his initial description of student success. When asked to explain the connection between Blackness and success Mr. Smart shared the following:

So, you can say that the qualities I mentioned will propel a student no matter what race they are, but oftentimes being Black means you have to have a certain level of these qualities to succeed [hand gesturing], if you will. Being that we consider ourselves a nurturing environment it may be a little less here, here we're gonna be a supportive environment to assist them and teach them how to persevere, but outside of this environment, that perseverance they're going to need that when they are not in such a supportive situation it's going to have need to be magnified. So yes, it has something to do a race to persevere and struggle and know how to deal with struggle. That's being Black.

Mr. Smart's description of success for Black students is reminiscent of the old adage, "Black folks have to be twice as good to get half as much." In contrast to the school leaders at Redd, he does not seem to think that Blackness necessitates a change in characteristics for successful students. Instead, he believes that Black students need heightened ability across his aforementioned characteristics, primarily perseverance.

### *Summary*

In summation, the most pertinent takeaway from these qualitative focus group interviews was that the school leaders at Redd and McCune believe normative ways of assessing student success are too narrow and do not account for the varied ways Black students experience schooling and society. School leaders at both sites view success as multifaceted and extending beyond conventional metrics of student success. These leaders emphasize the importance of

demonstrating growth over time, perseverance, maturation, a strong racial and cultural identity, and the cultivation of critical thinking that enables one to be a change agent. Such traits are not viewed as substitutes for traditional measures of success, like academic performance; rather, they are seen as complementary to the success of Black students. Their recognition that Black students need different attributes in order to be successful, explains why their schools operate differently and why they are able to produce different outcomes. The leaders at Redd in particular hold a belief that outside of academic proficiency, Black students require a strong racial identity and a critical view of the world that inspires them to create change. For the leaders at McCune, Black students' success is tied to their ability to not be deterred by obstacles they encounter on their different journeys. The findings from these conversations with school leaders illustrate a more holistic and culturally informed understanding of student success.

### **Teachers**

*Redd: Ms. House, Ms. King, Ms. Styles, and Mrs. Spalding*  
*McCune: Ms. Toussaint and Ms. London*

Amongst school personnel, teachers spend the most time directly interacting with students, therefore it is crucial to unpack their descriptions and beliefs about student success. The ways in which teachers at both sites conceptualized student success impacts how they structure their daily interactions with students as well as their classroom practices. As was the case during my focus group interviews with school leaders, teachers were asked to describe common characteristics amongst students they would characterize as a success on their respective campuses. For the teachers at Redd Elementary, their initial answers were strikingly reminiscent of the descriptors their school leaders shared. Mrs. Spalding described a student who struggled behaviorally when she first entered her class, regularly causing classroom disruptions. However,

the teacher shared that, she was able to build a relationship with this student over the course of the year, and considered her successful because the student was resilient in spite of adverse home circumstances and was comfortable being herself. Ms. King prefaced her answer about student success by saying:

I personally will add when I look at our community and see that you know what all we deal with, with our students. We don't come from communities that have a lot of resources. It's a lot that we don't have. And there's a lot that contributes to, sometimes the trauma they come to school with.

Though this statement was meant to preface her explanation of a successful student, it revealed that the teacher seems to recognize the importance of context when defining success. She went on to detail her experiences with a student who had endured a great deal of trauma and had a reputation around Redd for being a problem student. But again, during his time at Redd, the student was engulfed by a community of supportive adults. He gradually showed academic and behavioral improvement and he is now preparing to graduate. According to the teachers I spoke with at Redd, these students were deemed a success not only because of the outcomes they produced, but because they reached these outcomes after arduous journeys.

The similarities in answers shared by Redd teachers and school leaders revealed a culture that emphasized not giving up on students. When asked why staff members at Redd have similar ideas of success, Ms. House responded:

Because there's a community where we're always sharing about these students, and we're connected, and they follow us. So I'm in first grade and then when they go to second grade, I have a story to kind of tell that second grade teacher... And so, I think that's, that's kind of the way that the culture, but that's how we create that culture of seeing those students that have been like, seeing them, recognizing their brilliance so that we don't shut them down.

While most teachers mentioned student growth from the standpoint of grades and behavior, Ms. Green highlighted growth in identity within her descriptor of student success. When asked to

describe a successful student, Ms. Green shared the following story about a student who transferred to Redd from a private school:

The environment at the private school you know, they were being called all type of racial epithets I mean, they dealt with a lot of racism. They come to Redd, they experienced teachers who, again, just completely affirm who they are. I would identify that as a success because they came to Redd and they got that foundation of understanding who they are, understanding what systemic racism looks like, understanding how their community needs them, and just being like strong, solid leaders I would identify that as a success.

This example is another important departure from our normative conceptions of student success because this student's success did not involve academic achievement. The aforementioned student enrolled at Redd already excelling in their core subjects; however, she was not successful in this teachers' eyes because the student had not developed a strong sense of self and a critical view of the world.

Like their school leaders, though I did not bring explicit attention to race, the teachers at Redd leaned into race in their explanations of student success. Blackness had a significant impact on Redd teachers' conceptions of student success. Not only did Black students need different attributes in order to be successful but success was viewed as markedly different in definition for Black students. One theme that emerged in the teachers' description of a successful Black student as opposed to other students was Black students' role as community change agents. Ms. House shared the following:

I feel that our goal as an educator, I feel like we have to work with the end goal in mind. The goal is [students] graduate knowing and thinking and understanding people within their own community because our community needs help. We need you to come back to be the change things. You know what I mean? A firm foundation and understanding who they are and understanding that we need them in this community to make a change.

Similar to Ms. Green, Ms. House uses the word "foundation," which I believe speaks to the differences in conceptions of success for primary teachers and secondary teachers. At the



primary level educators believe they are still shaping worldviews and perspectives of self, therefore their views on student success are markedly different from those instructing and administering high school. I probed into what Ms. House meant by successful students knowing who they are and she shared, “to completely be okay with identifying who they are in every way. Whether it's their nationality, whether it's, it's who they are, you know, male or female however they identify as a student, loving who they are.” Ms. House’s quote demonstrates the importance she places on student identity in her understanding of Black student success.

In fact, Ms. House was not the only teacher that viewed student identity development as a key component of Black student success. Ms. King shared that from her perspective, identity development is a core part of preparing successful Black students at Redd. In the following statement, Ms. King explains why student identity development is a core part of her work in the classroom:

I start with identity. And then we kind of have to build to build up students to recognize their power to recognize to all of like, race, identity, diversity, all of those things just to start, and then they see people in the world that are making change, and then we kind of go back. And so we tried, we go from world to nation to state to community and then kind of back to self and then they use kind of everything that they've learned to see how they can use their power to make a difference. And when that bulb goes off, I know we got another one.

Ms. King and Ms. House carry expansive notions of student identity that extend beyond race, demonstrating that identity development must be a robust undertaking. The school leaders at Redd only mentioned race and ethnicity in connection to student identity, but teachers, who have more daily interactions with students discussed identity as a multifaceted concept. Like Ms. King, several teachers made it apparent that for Black students, success involves community enhancement and racial uplift. The idea of giving back began to reveal a collective orientation toward success that rejects the idea of student success being an individual endeavor. Moreover,

Redd teachers spoke of critical thinking being integral to Black student success, which had come forth in my conversations with Redd school leaders.

As previously, stated the educators at Redd view critical thinking in a specific social justice-oriented fashion that aims to create societal change. However, there was some variance in teachers' views and perspectives of critical thinking. Ms. Green explained that Black students need critical thinking and a sense of self to push back against the common "traps" of success. She said that in a capitalistic society, Black students can be blinded by money in their understandings of success which only hurts the Black community. She instead urged for a communal perspective of success:

It's a success if we educated a young mind that is open and willing to come back and be a success in their community, meaning they don't have to make the most money. Are you coming in some way to be a change, or make an impact back where your people need you? Otherwise, we're just educating them to send them out to be the average person in society. Those rich Black people are not coming back to help the community. We still praise them, but it's like we need help. And so that's a success for me is can I get these students to understand their community, not think like everybody else. So that's my thing, question everything that's my message.

Ms. Greens conception of critical thinking is not tied to academic content, but instead grounded in students' perspective of the world. She was the only educator to call out the particular dangers of capitalism and a need for Black students to critical examine what society tells them success should look like. For Mrs. Spalding, critical thinking is a tool for disruption for Black students:

They need critical thinking cause they need to disrupt and transform our society into a place that's more tolerable we don't know when the change is going to really, you know be realized. But the little bits and moments that we have, we have to take full advantage of those. And the only way we can take full advantage of those moments, is to make sure that the Black children in particular understand who, how powerful they are, and how valuable they are and, and that we need them.

Mrs. Spalding's form of critical thinking again extends beyond curriculum and aims to make a societal impact. From her purview, critical thinking for Black students involves empowering them to believe that change is possible.

I was particularly fixated on this need for Black students to question the world and authority figures in ways that other students are not asked to. When I asked the group why Black students in particular must question and think critically, Ms. House shared the following:

I think it's important for all students, but especially Black students, because they are not always going to be in a space like Redd. So, I want them to question everything now. So that when they're in spaces that are not where everybody looks like them, or they're not being treated fairly, they can say like, "wait a minute, I remember when I was in elementary school, I was taught I should question everything."

Unlike the previous responses regarding critical thinking, she does not discuss societal or communal transformation, but instead a need for Black students to think critically and question to ensure they do not passively endure mistreatment or inequity. Ms. King had a different perspective of critical thinking that was more closely tied to the questioning of knowledge and information. She explained that Black students need to think critically to be successful because, "there's so much information in the world. And there's so many people that have more power that are just like, 'This is how it is.' And I want the students to be able to be like, why?" She went on to explain:

I give them (students) the space to ask the questions, 'Why is it like this?' Why? Why is every story that we're reading about Black people or Black little kid has a struggle they have to overcome something and then they start to make the connections they recognize it's like this. So, what now?

Ms. King's quote captures the essence of critical thinking at Redd. While teachers may differ in their understandings of what critical thinking is and its purpose, they are unified in viewing curriculum as the primary vehicle through which they develop their students' critical view of the

world. For teachers at Redd, student success is deeply tied to Black students viewing themselves as a part of the Black collective and working toward improving circumstances for Black folks.

The descriptions of a successful student provided by McCune teachers again returned to these notions of growth and perseverance. One teacher described student success as their ability to adapt to the new responsibilities they encounter when they reach high school. She shared that as a ninth-grade teacher she has seen many students become overwhelmed with the newness of high school, but the ones who are successful find ways to manage these new responsibilities. Though it was not explicitly stated, this understanding of student success still seemed to place an importance on students' academic proficiency, because managing responsibilities seems to be linked to performing better in school academically. Another teacher shared a story about a student she deemed a success because of the student's ability to continually challenge herself. As a foreign language teacher; this participant shared that many students in her class are often hesitant to take her Advanced Placement courses. However, she deemed this one student successful not because he received the highest grade in her course, but because he continued to challenge himself by taking rigorous foreign language courses as he matriculated through McCune. Her ideas of student success were primarily grounded in her students' ability to appreciate the journey of schooling with all of its trials and tribulations, rather than having a hyperfocus on achievement as defined by grades and test scores. These descriptors of student success were at times race-neutral, and primarily centered on students' ability to grow academically, behaviorally, and socially during their time at McCune. Additionally, these teachers' explanations of student success were directly aligned to their school leaders, which again reveals a strong school culture and a shared school perspective of student success.

When asked about the extent to which Blackness impacts their understandings of success, McCune teachers began to diverge in their conceptualizations. For Ms. London, success for Black students meant developing adept navigational skills in unwelcoming environments. She explained that while Black students' high grades may open up certain doors, their ability to succeed within these environments is about more than their intellect. As a McCune alum, she shares first-hand accounts of obstacles she encountered as a Black woman in the world outside of McCune with her students. When asked why she does this, she was candid in her explanation:

Because everybody is waiting for you (Black people) to mess up. They may not encounter those situations until college or even after college depending on where they go to college. But it will happen, and I want them to be aware of how to navigate those situations.

For Ms. London, these navigational skills center on Black students' abilities to code switch and adjust their ways of being in appropriate ways to maneuver through certain environments. She seemed to recognize that while some may take issue with her attending to respectability politics, she believes Black students need to understand the reality of the world they are living in in order for them to be successful.

The notion of attending to the world as it is shined through in the other teacher's descriptions of a successful Black student as well. Ms. Toussaint spoke about self-confidence as an integral aspect of success for Black students. Though she is not Black, Ms. Toussaint explained that during her time as a secondary teacher, she has seen many capable Black students not reach their full potential because they did not believe they "belonged" in certain settings. In response to this, she said that she tries to constantly affirm her Black students' identities as strong students with the hope that they will not be deterred by unwelcoming environments in the future. Ms. Toussaint also conveyed that she has a unique perspective as an immigrant, and talked about how she can relate to Black students feeling like an "other" as they enter collegiate

environments. She told me that she remembers having feelings of inadequacy that nearly derailed her trajectory, hence her insistence on Black students' confidence as a key driver of success. Ms. Toussaint's definition of success, while centered on Black students, can clearly be applied to all students from non-dominant backgrounds who experience school in isolation. Nevertheless, these descriptions of student success again give us a varied understanding of what success is for Black students, and how it is achieved.

### *Summary*

Teachers at both school sites called for more robust and comprehensive understanding of success; however, they framed it in vastly different ways. Teachers at both sites place value on student academic achievement, but do not think students' academic performance should be the sole measure of success. For McCune teachers, student growth and adaptability are paramount to success because they will continue to encounter unfamiliar and isolating environments as they venture into the world beyond MHS. For the teachers at Redd, student growth is inextricably tied to their sense of self and community. The findings from these conversations shed light on how educators' perspectives of success impact their teaching and how more expansive conceptualizations of student success impact teachers' actions.

### **Black Students:**

#### *\*Only McCune Students*

Educational research often omits student perspectives in our explorations of complex phenomena (Howard, 2001; Pena-Shaff et al., 2019; So & Brush, 2008). A project of this nature that centers Black students must engage the voices and perspectives of Black students. While this study included stakeholders at two schools, because of cognitive, social, and emotional development of primary students, only McCune High School students were asked to explain the

varied ways in which they understand success. While there are studies that have explored primary students' perspective of success (Carbonneau et al., 2024), I chose to not to include primary students because in my preliminary conversations with primary aged students, they struggled to convey their ideas in ways that were useful for this research. Amongst all stakeholder groups, Black students had the most intragroup similarities in their descriptions and understandings of success. Moreover, unsurprisingly, given their positionality, Black students were able to provide deeper insights into what success for Black students entails, as opposed to how it is actualized. Student participants rejected the notion that there is a singular definition of success for Black students but agreed that achieving any form of success is more difficult for Black students than non-Black students. This was the case for all the students in our focus group.

Jamal answered my first question on Black student success by stating, "What makes you successful as a Black student is doing more than what the expectations are put on you." As he concluded his statement, the entire group responded with head nods and finger snaps signifying their agreement with his statement. Jamal and his peers explained that the world will expect less of you based on the fact that you are Black, and, consequently, Black students must resist the temptation of mediocrity and strive for as much as possible in order to be successful. Christina chimed in with the following quote in response to Jamal, "I agree because being a successful Black student means you overcame all the systemic and social adversities in education and in life [laughs]. Success is different for us because they [non-Black students] don't feel the same struggles that we do." So, while student participants did not think success looks a specific way for all Black students, they do feel it requires a common tenacity in the face of obstacles.

Though Black students were aligned in the idea that Black success means persevering through obstacles and hardship, student participants continued to emphasize the personalized

nature of success. From students' purview, personalized success did not mean success for the individual, but rather the individual deciding what success is based on their own personal values, desires, and beliefs. For instance, one student described how some Black students define success based on their desire to change their environmental circumstances, but that is not success for all Black students. The student elaborated:

Not everybody wants to make it out of here. There is a tiny percentage of people who don't care if they stay in that poverty. They just want better for themselves and their families. Others don't want to be stuck in an area where they have to see gangbanger violence and homeless people.

Raheem's assertions highlights the importance of students' values in relation to how they come to understand and strive for success. Raheem went on to explain that not all Black students want the same aims out of life and that Black students can still be successful as long as they fulfil their own goals. Similarly, rising twelfth grader Iyana explained Black student success the following way: "To be a successful Black student means to excel at a level that satisfies your expectations of yourself and can contribute to your envisioned future." The student's use of the word "your" twice appeared to be intentional as she conveyed the personalized nature of success. Because of her response, I queried into what success would mean for Iyana. She shared that for her success means graduating from McCune and attending a four-year university. Despite their belief that success is personalized, students remained firm in their belief that it requires one to exceed expectations and ignore the limitations others may place upon them. The students all reported that school personnel at McCune defined success by college eligibility. When asked how they believe their staff members define success, Jamal responded, "I believe our staff define success as kids going on to college or passing." Tim immediately followed up with, "I want to piggyback off of what Jamal said I think success for staff overall is college." I asked students how they became aware of their staff's view of success and they shared that it is communicated visually



with the Honor Roll Wall, “that everybody can see when they enter the school.” And that in their classrooms teachers constantly speak about college as students next step after graduation. Despite the culture of the school they attend, Black students did not agree that a student is only successful if they attend college. Student participants believed that Black students were successful as long as they perceived themselves to be successful based on their internal values and beliefs.

As our conversation continued, we began discussing how success is fostered for Black students. Because Black students had varied understandings of success, our conversation primarily focused on how to foster traditional forms of success. Students agreed that hard work and astute decision-making were critical attributes for achieving good grades and gaining college access. All of the students that I spoke to stressed the importance of hard work as a key attribute of successful students. One student’s description below provides a summative glimpse into how students spoke about hard work:

I would say hard working over being smart. There are a lot of smart people that are doing well but, it is because a lot of them are more so hard working like they turn in their work consistently, so they do well.

Student descriptions of hard work alluded to successful students maintaining a constant focus as detailed in the following quote by a twelfth grader: “I think a lot of [successful] people are going around constantly working or constantly like...they don’t really stop their academic work to do anything else. Because they create boundaries for themselves.” Student participants spoke passionately about the role of agency in student success. They felt that McCune had all the requisite supports for any student to achieve in the manner that they did, but some do not based on their own decision. One student shared that students who are successful want to succeed and,

therefore, engage in certain actions or behaviors that enhance success. For instance, in the. Quote below a student described how successful students remain dedicated:

They are dedicated you know, they're driven by something, whether that's to, you know, move away from the environment that I grew up in, or just one to be successful the way they define their own success. They're driven by that and they're dedicated to, like it makes a difference. They take certain classes meet or meet certain people. Whatever it takes.

Unlike previous stakeholders' groups, student descriptions of student success primarily placed the onus on students in the pursuit of success. Students were not a success because of the resources they had, or the opportunities presented to them; rather such achievement was based on what students do with said opportunities. Decision making and agency were not discussed by any other stakeholder groups, but Black students identified both as key components of student success. They shared that successful students carry themselves "in certain ways" both inside and outside of the classroom, which ensures they do not cost themselves future opportunities. The students could not describe the "right way" to carry oneself, but they were consistent in describing how representing oneself in a way that impresses adults on campus is essential to success. Students also shared that self-advocacy is key for successful students. They stated that the successful students they knew communicated with teachers and administrators regularly to ensure that their needs were met.

To conclude our conversation, I wanted to probe into how academically successful Black students are perceived at McCune. I wanted to explore if Black students experienced any form of social ostracization for being academically inclined or if they were perceived as "acting white," because they earned good grades. I began by sharing with students that in educational discourse, some scholars have argued that being a high-performing Black student often comes at the expense of one's social standing or cultural identity. I then asked if it was "cool" for Black

students at McCune, to get good grades. I also asked: Have you encountered this idea of acting White? And do you feel there is tension between being Black and smart? When asked about the general McCune perception of academically inclined Black students, student participants were astounded by the idea that academic proficiency would in any way infringe upon their Blackness or impact how they are viewed by their peers. The first response came from Christina, a rising senior:

I don't think it's acting White because like you are...there still Black. It's not acting White it's just doing what you want to do. They're, you know, trying to do better...I'm sorry, this is baffling to me, how they think that how they associate academics with whiteness.

As one student explained, the absence of White students at McCune in some ways prevents the notion of academic proficiency being tied to whiteness:

There are no White people at our school. So that thought never even crossed our mind. We want to have good grades because I want to do this outside of school, or I want to do I want to have freedom in my life. But I don't like that term acting White because I want to like I have good grades. No, I want to have good grades because If I go home and bring this C it's a problem.

This quote would seem to reject the idea of a White gaze and instead emphasize Black students believing that they need to earn good grades in order to enjoy certain out-of-school privileges and appease their parents. This is worth highlighting because it also debunks the notions of Black parents not holding their students to high academic standards. The students' responses to these questions about academic proficiency and Blackness also shed light on a culture that exists within McCune that allows for Blackness to exist in conjunction with academic proficiency, rather than in opposition to it. This final student quote speaks to the culture that exists within McCune and how it connects to Black student success:

The idea of acting White does not exist because, again, like how you were talking about what did you say? You said something about, like success and to me it's basically just when you step in that school [MHS], the staff and the teachers and everyone like wants

Black success, and it's basically just thinking about your future and thinking about what you can open up for yourself later on.

Josiah's insight sheds light on the importance of school culture in relation to Black student success and identity. In environments where success is normalized for Black students, it is not a sacrifice of identity for Black students to succeed.

### *Summary*

The Black students at McCune offered valuable insights into what Black students' perceptions are of student success. These participants feel that every student should be able to define what success is for themselves. Their descriptions of successful students reveal that they place some importance on academic proficiency, but they also explained that this may not be everybody's goal. Another unique contribution from students was the belief that student agency plays a critical role in achieving success. Many students emphasized the importance of personal decision-making, dedication, and the way one carries themselves as essential elements of success. These findings from student participants are critical because they emphasize the importance of meaningful social connections between students and their educators. Educators are unable to contribute to or recognize personalized views of success if they do not know their students well. Consequently, in order for schools to enhance Black student success, educators need to have in-depth meaningful relationships with Black students to understand their goals, values, and beliefs. Moreover, the students' emphasis on individual agency highlights the significant responsibility that Black students feel they must shoulder to achieve success. They expressed a belief that they cannot rely solely on their institutions for support but must instead rely on their own self-motivation and determination.

### **Black Caregivers:**

While caregivers do not have formal roles within school environments, they indisputably have an influence on the day-to-day operations of the schools their children attend. It was imperative for my study to examine parents' perspectives of what student success is, because I wanted to better understand what Black parents are looking for when they select schools for their children. In parent focus group interviews, rather than asking for description of a successful student, participants were asked to define what would it mean for their child to be successful in school. Surprisingly, none of the parents spoke about academic proficiency when discussing what success means for their child. Several parents shared that learning is a critical part of students succeeding, but they did not directly connect learning to students' academic output in the form of grades or test scores. For example, one father of a McCune student explained student success the following way:

The way it is now, it's success if you went to school and learn something. Every day we have a debriefing. What happened in class? Anything exciting happen? So, to me for today, the success lies within that child trying hard and not slacking off. All kids are gonna slack off, well the majority are gonna slack off. But what did you learn? Did you learn anything? I find it very refreshing as a parent when you tell me about certain things that she's learned that I might not have known about.

The description this father provided in no way refers to his daughters' academic attainment, but instead centered on what she takes away from her time at school, namely learning. The same father went on to explain that learning is critical because success lies in a student's ability to apply the things that he or she learned in the real world. Other caregivers in both focus groups agreed with these sentiments and focused on student success beyond traditional academic metrics. One Redd parent shared plainly, "I don't know the answer to that question about successful children. But healthy children are children that can be kind to both themselves and others." This quote was a rejection of the traditional school idea of success and instead pointed to the importance of student mental health and wellness. Parental conceptualizations of student

success were more robust than in any other stakeholder group. Responses varied from learning, being kind to others, wellness, mental health, being well-rounded to applying new information to real world problems, and being a productive member of society.

For nearly all the parent participants in this study, student mental health was a vital component of success. It is important to note that this research took place on the heels of the COVID-19 pandemic, as mounting research revealed an adolescent mental health crisis (Imran et al., 2020; Phelps & Sperry, 2020). The parents did not consider a child to be successful if they were suffering from any form of mental anguish. For instance, a caregiver from McCune shared a story about a family friend whose child was attending UC San Diego and widely considered successful. However, during a campus visit, his parents discovered he had experienced severe mental anguish and dropped out of school. This reinforced her belief that grades are not everything. One McCune parent described how student success factored into her school choice for her child:

One of the teachers recommended that we send them even to Mount St. Mary's, or Harvard Westlake but the LA Times ran an article recently about the students at these schools actively successfully ending their lives via suicide. How is that a level of success? Do we really want to kind of put that type of pressure on the kids just to be able to get into schools that are also perceived to be the best? So like, the success standard, I guess has to be like developed based off of what each individual family believes is successful. But like if my kid feels good about himself, if he has friends that are kind to him, if he has a good sense of, self when he walks in the classroom that's success.

This quote is critical for the development of a more robust understanding of student success.

Normative understandings of student success focus solely on academic outcomes, and rarely interrogate the cost of high levels of achievement, particularly for Black students. Black parents continued to call on more expansive notions of success, as exemplified in the following quote:

It's funny, you should ask that question because I was the liaison between Redd and the district. So, we were having a roundtable with some administrators and other parents when an administrator says, "Well, when your son graduates from high school, do you

consider him being a success? “And I said, “well, that depends, I don't base my son's success on whether or not he graduates with straight A's.” I know that a lot of, the folks sitting around this table feel like if my son is successful in meeting these criteria: great grades, great college and all that. I said, but if he does all that, and if he's a fucked up person, then what difference does it make? I am more concerned that my son is whole and complete. So, if he brings home B's, I'm good with that. So long as he number one has a strong sense of self his mental health is intact, and that he is a good and contributing person to society.

Again, this parent does not stress that academic proficiency was the primary determinant of student success, but rather evidenced by the ways in which a student interacts with others and themselves. As society has become more aware of the detriments of poor mental health, the parents in my study are expanding their understandings of what it means to raise a successful child. The question is: How are schools evolving to meet this reality?

While parents across both sites talked about the importance of mental health in student success, Redd parents specifically spoke about student identity as a key component of success.

Dawna, a caregiver at shared:

Success, for me, is them having a strong sense of identity and who they are, and then knowing that they can succeed in what whatever they, wherever the capacities are, and whatever their passions are, that they can prosper in doing that, success doesn't mean money. It doesn't mean you know, straight A's, but at least they know who they are. They're not questioning that, they're strong willed, and that they work hard. They have some sense of getting ahead some sense of, you know, doing well and making contributions in the world.

When asked why student identity is especially critical for Black students, the same parent replied:

For all children, but especially Black children I think it's especially important that Black, children know who they are. and then give themselves permission to not have to completely conform to other cultures or other things, simply because they are enough. And so, I think identity is really, really big because there are a lot of children suffering with you know, just not being comfortable in their own skin.

Like the staff at Redd, the parents broached the topic of race before I began to probe into how their child being Black factored into their understanding of success. They shared how

success for Black students must be expansive and involve, for example, “the development of their sense of beauty and their place in the world.” Considering that Black students have varied experiences in school, it is not a surprise that parents view success from starkly different perspectives. Moreover, because these parents themselves were once Black students, they were able to speak to the ways in which schools stripped them of culture and individuality and why they wanted to disrupt this pattern for their own children. The following excerpt demonstrates how one Black parents’ own educational experiences impacted how they view success for their child:

Success was different from my generation anyway, in order for us to be successful, we had to basically deny a lot of who we are as people, and then to kind of conform to those ways and those structures. So, it is important that my son knows who he is, when he goes out into the world and to have a strong sense of self and not to the extent that he has a chip on his shoulder, but, you know, he needs to know and understand what it's like to step out in that world. But to have that foundation that, I am a strong Black person, I am a smart Black person, and I can interact with anyone out there in the world because I am strong in who I am.

According to this father, Black students require an additional set of characteristics in order to succeed because they experience the world differently than their non-Black peers. In contrast, several other parents at McCune did not report that race in any way impacted their understandings of success for their child. When queried about the impact of race on their understanding of success, parents argued that Black children should strive for the same levels of success as other children. Many of the parent participants from McCune recognized that their child’s race plays a significant role in their life, but they do not think they Black students need to have or exhibit different attributes, they just need access to the same resources as others. This finding is important because it reveals a developmental departure in how parents conceptualize success and demonstrates diversity within Black parents understanding success. I identify this as a developmental departure because similar to Redd teachers, this parent speaks to the importance



of building their child's foundation. None of the stakeholders at the secondary level mentioned student's "foundation", presumably because it is already established by the time students enter high school.

### *Summary*

Caregivers' explorations of student success fundamentally differed from all other stakeholder groups because they were asked to describe what it means for their child to be a success, rather than offering a broad description of student success. The personalized nature of the question elicited a more humanizing and nuanced understanding of student success that emphasizes wellness. However, there were also important distinctions that emerged from parents based on their child's developmental age. Parent participants from both sites were adamant about the importance of mental health and made direct connections between student success and wellness. Redd parents in particular felt that their children needed to know and be comfortable with who they are in order to be successful. The most salient insight from these caregiver discussions was the significance of mental health as a foundational aspect of student success. Parents want their children to achieve at high levels but do not think it should come at the expense of their wellness.

### **Education Scholars:**

*Dr. Tyrone Howard*  
*Dr. Na'ilah Nasir*  
*Dr. Shaun Harper*

To provide unique insights into the factors associated with school success for Black students, I spoke to a variety of stakeholders involved in the education of Black students, including academics who study this population. It was paramount to interrogate the educational researcher participants' perspectives of student success, because they are powerful actors within

public education that provide training and recommendations to educators across the country.

Unlike other stakeholder groups, I interviewed scholars individually, which may explain some of the variance in their answers compared to others interviewed. The primary factor that separated these researchers' perspectives from other stakeholder groups' perspectives was their interrogations of environmental factors as opposed to holding individual notions of success for Black students or any student group.

In my conversation with Dr. Tyrone Howard about student success, he began by explaining what enables students' success. He stated that student success involved both the environment and the individual. From an environmental perspective, Dr. Howard said that he believes successful students have supportive adults in their lives who ensure that students' academic and non-academic needs are met. He further stressed the importance of environmental support:

You have to have adults basically who believe in you, adults who are going to affirm you, you have to have adults who are going to show up for you and I think that showing up it's got to be consistent it can't be on occasion... I think support means that when you're struggling academically, they want to check in with you to see is everything okay, Is there anything I can do to help or support? So, if I'm the only Black student, I hear anti-Black comments, you got to speak up and let them know the other students that that's not going to be allowed. That student will be protected. I think support a big part of support is protection and advocacy.

This focus on environments calls into question the entire concept of student success. Howard seems to be suggesting that the attributes of individuals are not the primary determinant of success; it is rather the ecosystems in which they learn and grow as the driving determinant.

Similarly, Dr. Shaun Harper refused to provide a list of characteristics of successful students and even refused to define what student success is. He explained his reasoning:

My work on Black students has intentionally resisted the exploration of individual notions of giftedness, grit, hard work, exceptionalism. I have been more interested in big institutional, cultural, and familial factors that lead to the success of Black students. I

don't know that I can name five characteristics for individuals themselves. It's just so inconsistent with my epistemological stance really. I imagine that some other people would tell you that successful Black students are really determined and that they have a lot of grit and that they have a lot of resilience. I can tell you what the schools do.

Again, Harper is calling for us to resist a focus on individual attributes of successful students by highlighting the importance of environmental and structural factors in shaping whether or not students attain the traditional markers of educational success. In essence, students' academic proficiency or lack thereof reflects the quality of their environment and not student intellect. Aligned with the previous academics, Dr. Na'ilah Nasir also spoke about the importance of environment, as opposed to the individual, in her conceptualization of student success. In the following excerpt, Dr. Nasir explains her problem with normative notions and measures of student success:

So, when I think about a successful student, I think about what it means to be in a system where you may have been an amazing athlete or an artist, or a mathematician or a psychologist but your environment didn't give you the wherewithal to follow those things. And so, you came out an accountant, like so by some metrics, you're successful, but by the way that I think about it, that's not actually success to me if the thing you were supposed to do and create and be and contribute to when the world gets lost along the way, then that's not a successful outcome.

Nasir provides a narrative of success that extends beyond the traditional markers of academic success by pointing to student performance in domain-specific activities. Nasir also focuses on systems in her response, revealing a different orientation toward student success that examines the spaces in which students grow and evolve. A student's good grades may indicate that they were in an environment that was or remains conducive for success; however, such a narrow perspective prevents us from recognizing that a school full of students with good grades does not equate to a school full of students who are well and able to show up as their full selves. While this expansion of our ideas of success is critical, there were still some insights into what student success means for the individual.

From an individual perspective, the scholars recognized the importance of academic proficiency but also recognized other attributes as being drivers of student success. Dr. Howard stated that he believes successful students are driven, confident, and communicate well. These attributes are all integral parts of the development of “navigation skills” that Howard deems key for successful students. While Dr. Howard thinks “navigation skills” are important for all successful students, he argued they are particularly important for certain students:

I think [navigational skills] are oftentimes specific to students of color because I think Black kids and other kids of color have to learn how to navigate like racially hostile environments, they have to navigate you know, racist people, and they have to learn how to deal with issues and circumstances that attack their identity in ways that say, majority of dominant kid not have to so I think that that part is unique. Then the confidence piece again, I think, confidence writ large it's something that helps but I think the confidence for kids of color or Black students is different because you have to learn how to be confident in an environment that oftentimes tries to undermine or erode your confidence especially if you have a strong racial identity.

Howard’s mention of navigation is similar to Mr. Smart in that they both believe Black students will encounter unique obstacles on the basis of their race and will have to persevere through such experiences to be successful. Without probing, Dr. Howard continued to bring forth the point that student identity matters in success. Still, his perspective on student identity was not the same as previous stakeholder groups. Similar to the parents at Redd, Dr. Howard explained that student identity is vital to their success. However, by contrast, Dr. Howard also said that he does not believe a strong identity has to correlate with race. He then explained differences in identity and confidence:

I think you can have a strong confidence in self and that may not always correlate with sense of self at least racially and ethnically. I can just feel strong about me because I'm good at math. I can feel strong about my sense of self because I'm very popular with my peers socially, right. But that may not tie into my blackness. So, I think there's sort of sub domains of confidence and racial confidence is one of them, but not everything.

This separation of various forms of confidence as it relates to identity is worth highlighting because it suggests that students must feel confident in some factor, skill, or pathway in order to be successful. It does not have to be their race, as long as their confidence and sense of identity in these other sub domains is strong enough to buffer against external attacks. Similarly, Dr. Nasir argued for the importance of confidence in self, not solely connected to race but as a means of retaining one's love of self. Dr. Nasir explained the importance of identity within the context of schooling:

It's important because I think without that the ways in which schools are racist, sexist, and homogenized and homogenizing; you can end up being smart and well educated, but self-hating that's not a win to me. Like that actually that's a lose, right? If you come out of school with academic knowledge but feeling inferior. I wouldn't want that for any of my kids or any of our kids. That's why it's critical to me.

Nasir brings forth important points about the ways in which schools are designed to assimilate students and strip diverse students of their varied identities. Conceptions of self and identity development are therefore critical to ensure that students do not leave schools having lost or hating aspects of who they are. These notions of identity and confidence in relation to student success are complex but most importantly reveal that schools need to instill a belief and knowledge of self in young people in order for them to succeed. Doing so requires a myriad of changes in policy and practice that encourage difference as opposed to sameness.

In the same way they expanded upon common attributes of successful students, these scholars also urged for a more expansive definition of success in itself. For example, Dr. Nasir explained that only focusing on academic outcomes as a measure of success prevents us from recognizing the multitude of pathways students can take to achieve productive citizenry. She also said that she believes college is one way for students to be financially stable and support a future family, but it is not the only way. Therefore, she contended that we should celebrate and

acknowledge students for success in other areas that can still lead students to becoming viable adults. In connection, Dr. Howard believes we must work toward recognizing other forms of success in school:

I think we kind of in the mainstream ways we define that as success means you are getting good grades, but I also think there are social components to success and sometimes the two don't always go hand-in-hand. So, I think some students who are just really popular with their peers, that might be another way we think of success. Some students who are successful in terms of their ability to get along with others that's a form of success. Some kids have strong leadership skills, they're very persuasive. They have strong verbal abilities, they can kind of get people to do things that they think is best for them. I don't think schools measured those qualities and success. I think that those other forms of success that I think should be counted into the equation.

Following this line of thinking, if schools find ways to acknowledge these other notions of success on site, it would likely increase the confidence of many students. When schools only measure student success based on academics, we ignore the multitude of ways that students may be demonstrating success in other areas.

All of the academics interviewed mentioned the relevance of race before I probed into how it impacted their understandings of student success. Similar to Howard, Nasir argued that success for Black students requires unique characteristics because we have different experiences. She further expounded upon this idea:

I think White students can get away with not having certain characteristics and still be okay. To some degree, they get a path differently. So, I think they are particularly important for Black students because the systems judge us more harshly and are quicker to throw us away.

When asked to provide an example, Dr. Nasir replied with the following:

I think White students can get away with especially White boys can get away with not having that because people will say, "Oh, he's really smart. He just didn't need to come to class." But with our [Black] kids they are like, "Oh, he's not in class? He must be doing drugs on the corner." They go so quickly to they must not be worthy. And so, some of the ways you have to navigate that and that's from elementary school, to middle school, to high school to college, to what it means to be in the work world. That's what it means to go to the doctor or the dentist. Like you're that way of being you have to be to push

against the natural perceptions in a kind of racist world. We're navigating them all the time.

The above quote highlights the need for successful Black students to attain and maintain certain characteristics that will serve them long beyond their time in school. As the above example explained, Black students need to learn survival tactics in a world designed for their destruction. By contrast, Dr. Harper recognized that Black students have varied experiences, but he conversely argued that environments need to adapt to Black students, rather than Black students always needing to develop metaphorical armor for protection in schools. The following statement is a rebuttal to the notion of Black student success being different than that of White students:

We don't expect White students to have agency. We instead expect schools and educational environments to be structured in ways that meet their needs. So why would we expect anything extra of a Black student? We don't expect that of other students. Instead, the expectation is that if there is a problem with the sociological context of schooling, that you fix the context, you don't fix the student.

He then buttressed his argument with the following example:

So, I mean, you if we're talking about a Black girl that's in the third grade, what kind of agency is she supposed to have? She's a child. Yeah, I'm sure her parents can be agentic advocates on her behalf. They shouldn't have to. But a Black girl that's in the third grade should not be expected to have agency. She should be expected to be a child who is in a classroom that honors her personhood that honors her cultural interests or cultural background, her cultural history. She should be able to exist and learn in an environment where students are not putting their hands in her hair, or calling her racially derogatory terms.

This contrast of perspective on Black student success is complex because Harper is arguing that expecting more of Black students in order for them to be considered a success further contributes to their marginalization. In other words, If we attempt to instill Black students with a specific set of attributes that we deem integral to their success, we ignore the problems that lie within the

institution. While this point is critical, I am left wondering: What happens to Black students while we wait for environmental transformation?

### *Summary*

Like all of the previous stakeholder groups, the academic participants in this study suggested a more robust understanding of student success. Harper's pushback on individual conceptions of student success was compelling in that it ushers us to examine structural and environmental interventions to enhance student success as opposed to simply trying to teach students certain skills. Moreover, his assertion that asking more of successful Black students is reinforcement of racial inequity that adds a critical layer of analysis when examining the role of race in student success. Howard and Nasir separated themselves from other stakeholder groups by suggesting that schools need to recognize and celebrate more varied forms of success. Their emphasis on schools demonstrating values through the student behaviors they choose to recognize reveals that expanding conceptions of student success requires schools to recognize varied forms of achievement. Observing and incorporating the perspectives of scholars who study Black students was vital for understanding the practical implications of expanding common conceptions of student success.

### **Conclusion**

All stakeholder groups urged for more expansive notions of student success that recognize students as more than just regurgitators of knowledge. While not all stakeholders reported race impacting their conceptions of success, they all acknowledged that Black students experience schools in distinct ways. One of the most salient takeaways that emerged from the multi-stakeholder design of this research was the strong alignment amongst stakeholders at each research site. This alignment amongst stakeholders at Redd and McCune is reflective of a strong



institutional culture that has a high level of buy-in from different parties. Additionally, juxtaposing the perspective of educational scholars with that of practitioners enabled me to see that successful schools for Black children embody the work of experts in the field. During my conversation with Dr. Harper, he made a similar claim:

[Successful schools for Black students] are actually doing the things that Tyrone Howard's work, Maisha Winn's work, Gloria Ladson-Billings work, Geneva Gay's work, Etta Hollins work, Rich Milner's work, and Vanessa Siddle-Walker's work says actually makes a difference and actually leads to Black students being successful.

Dr. Harper's insight and the varied perspectives of the stakeholders included in this research reveal an ever-present need to break through and down the rampant silos within education. A more robust and comprehensive perspective of success requires all stakeholders to be valued and heard.

## CHAPTER V

### Introduction

Despite decades of research and myriad changes in policy and practice, there are deep and persistent disparities in achievement between Black students and their peers in United States public schools. In fact, the success of Black students in public schools is one of the most complex and multifaceted challenges in public education. The complexity of Black education arises not from a lack of intellectual capability among Black students but rather from an anti-Black educational system and a broader society designed for their marginalization. In essence, Black students exist within institutions that are antithetical to their success.

A host of research has documented what happens in schools where Black students are not successful (Annamma et al., 2019; Howard, 2014; Kozol, 1992, 1992; Morris, 2016). Previous works on Black students have enhanced our understanding of how various factors, from inequitable hiring practices to monocultural pedagogy, can disproportionately harm Black children in school. I argue, however, that thorough understanding of a problem and its impact does not necessarily equate to finding effective solutions to ameliorate the issue. Data gathered from the sites in my study will provide the field with practical, empirically based framework for improve schools' servicing of Black students. While recognizing that context is crucial in any effective school reform efforts (Milner, 2020), the findings from this research provide essential insights into what happens *differently* in schools where Black students are successful compared to what occurs in those where they are not.

The two schools in my study, McCune High School and Redd Elementary School, exemplify how K-12 institutions can disrupt inequitable policies and practices that often render Black students vulnerable. In the following chapters, I introduce a framework for understanding effective schools for Black students, grounded in the qualitative findings from this study. This

framework highlights the practices and approaches that lead to both academic success and holistic well-being for Black students. While both schools employed numerous innovative and effective strategies, three primary constructs emerged as central to their success: (1) Intentionality with Blackness, (2) a comprehensive ecosystem of support, and (3) justice-centered school culture. I refer to these as constructs because they represent abstract, conceptual ideas that serve as the foundation for building and explaining the relationships and processes central to the theory (Moschis, 2024; Stenner et al., 2023; Udo-Akang, 2012). Themes, while insightful, lack the specificity and theoretical linkage required for developing a cohesive framework that explains outcomes.

Due to the stark differences in the ways each theme presented itself at these two sites, the findings from each section are separated by school to provide a clear perspective on how the themes played out at each campus.

## Intentionality with Blackness

Former president of Spelman College Dr. Beverly Tatum once used smog as an analogy to explain how racism subconsciously permeates society. Dr. Tatum's analogy suggests that in a racist society like the United States, individuals akin to "smog breathers," unconsciously absorb and sometimes perpetuate the deficit-based stereotypes they are inundated with (Tatum, 2003). I share this analogy because a similar phenomenon occurs within schools, particularly concerning anti-Blackness. Schools are microcosms of society; therefore, the anti-Black ethos embedded within American society permeates educational institutions (Diamond & Gomez, 2023; Dumas & ross, 2016; Spencer & Ullucci, 2022). Anti-Blackness is a specific form of cruelty and dehumanization directed toward those racialized as Black, impacting all facets of life for Black people (Dumas, 2016). Dumas and Ross have simplified anti-Blackness as society's inability and unwillingness to recognize the humanity of people racialized as Black (Dumas, 2016; ross, 2020).

Anti-Blackness and the logics derived from it harm Black students in innumerable ways within the schools, such as low teacher expectations and inequitably applied discipline practices. Due to the pernicious ways anti-Blackness is embedded within society, an integral aspect of creating schools that contribute to the educational success of Black students is *intentionality with Blackness*, which was the first theme that emerged from this study. I conceptualize "intentionality with Blackness" as an unapologetic and deliberate focus on Blackness in all aspects of schooling including the development of policies, practices, and interactions. This concept involves a critical examination of how Blackness is presented and engaged with within the school environment. Intentionality with Blackness is a robust and multifaceted effort requiring institutions to disrupt the dominant narratives around Black students and Blackness. As

one teacher participant described in an interview, conducted during this study the overarching goal of their schools is to “make Black students feel good about being Black.”

My research found that a key contributor to Black student success at each site was the school’s ability to meet the needs of Black students. Intentionality with Blackness prioritizes creating spaces where Black students feel seen, valued, and supported, ensuring that their unique needs are embedded into the fabric of school decision-making, resources, and pedagogical practices. School personnel at McCune spoke about a firm commitment to the communities they serve, which inspires a purposeful cultivation of learning spaces that are reflective of and welcoming to Black students. Creating spaces of belonging and affirmation for Black students begins with school leadership and trickles down through the entirety of the school. In the following quote, Mr. Smart—the principal of McCune High School—explained the importance of creating a sense of belonging for Black students at his site:

Well, I think the key element to having success for particularly Black kids is making sure that they are honored. They feel wanted. They feel like they have someone they can go to if they need something, being that support system where they don't feel alienated in their environment. It is making sure that they feel like they on equal playing field with everybody else.

Mr. Smart’s use of words such as “honored,” “wanted,” and “alienated” expresses Black students’ need to feel valued and that they matter within school spaces. For Black students, feeling that they matter within a school space undoubtably enhances their sense of belonging. He then speaks of the importance of Black students feeling they are attending a school with an even playing field; this point is critical because he is seemingly communicating the importance of Black students feeling as if they have the same chance as success as everyone else. During his interview, Mr. Smart also talked about how he is acutely aware of the general exclusion and marginalization that many Black students experience at school, and therefore insists on his staff

going above and beyond to counter that norm. Similarly, Dr. Canady, the principal of Redd Elementary School, used an analogous framing for educating Black students during her interview:

The composition of our school is over 80% students and families of African descent, so it would be foolish if we didn't have just a frame...we anchor everything on [Blackness] so that children are able to see reflections of self, just ongoing throughout their journey at the school.

Within the K-12 school context, seeing reflections of self means that Black students should be provided with curriculum that recognizes their identities, histories, and cultural perspectives as well as pedagogy that honors their unique ways of knowing, being, and communicating. Reflections of self also means that schools employ Black staff members and other school staff who actively validate and center Black students' voices.

In our conversations, Mr. Smart and Dr. Canady both stated that giving Black students the same educational environments as non-Black students will always leave Black children in a state of perpetual suffering in schools. Each school leader expressed the belief that Black students have distinct experiences within schools compared to their peers, necessitating tailored approaches to achieve equitable outcomes. I began with the two preceding quotes to frame how school leaders at these school sites approached, conceptualized, and thought about the intentionality of supporting Black students within the school setting. During a focus group interview with Black educational scholars, when asked about key attributes for school spaces where Black students succeed, Dr. Shaun Harper talked about this intentionality when he shared the following:

Those spaces not only appreciate but also strategically embed Black culture, Black history, and Black students' interest into the curriculum... there is an actual race conscious strategy to improve the success of Black students. It's not like oh, like "Yeah, we just have a set of student success initiatives for everybody, and this is supposed to benefit everybody." Schools that are more successful at improving the academic

achievement and overall wellness of Black students have Black students'-specific plans and strategies. They're customized. They take an equity approach as opposed to an equality approach. And they give Black students specifically what Black students need.

The following sections provide detailed accounts of how the sites in my study created the types of learning spaces that Dr. Harper described.

### *McCune High School*

As previously stated, the impetus for the creation of MHS was to provide a high-quality secondary school option for Black students in the Watts/Compton area. As I share these findings, it is important to remember that as McCune's racial demographics have shifted over time, Black students are no longer the ethnic majority. However, Black students remain a priority according to Mr. Smart. Beginning with the school's name, an intentional focus is placed on Black history and people, as explained by one of my parent participants from McCune, "Look at the name we're talking about, James McCune Smith, a school named after him is not just a regular school." Having a school named after Black trailblazers in itself exemplifies racial intentionality that can increase a sense of belonging for Black students. In spite of McCune being a predominately LatinX school, numerous participants shared how they viewed MHS as a "Black school." One parent participant explained it the following way:

McCune is our own, I see it as Black school. And you know that there you can have a voice, you can have a voice and then you can be able to, you won't be afraid to go ask anybody a question. If you have any questions or have any concern, you know they are there for you.

This parent participant went on to explain that she viewed MHS as "our own" school because it is one of few educational spaces where educators go out of their way to make Black students and their families feel comfortable.

Outside of the high school's name, the visuals within the school are a celebration of Black life, history, and culture. In the main entrance of the school, you see pictures of past

graduation classes that were majority Black. The hallways throughout the school, especially on the first floor, are adorned with images of Black civil rights leaders and contemporary Black figures that are important in the Black community, ranging from Kobe Bryant to Barak Obama. Walking down the main corridor of the school, you would see Issa Rae, famed comedian and actress who happens to be an alum of MHS. The library has numerous displays which highlight the work of Black authors such as Audre Lorde and James Baldwin. The library also displays the work of acclaimed academic and Harvard University professor Jarvis Givens who is also a MHS alum that maintains a relationship with the school. As you venture to the upper levels of the campus you are inundated with a litany of student work on the walls, the majority of which features some sort of Black art or nod to Black people. I believe the images and murals around MHS are a critical part of the schools leaders' intentionality because they create a feeling of celebration and belonging for Black students.

### School Staff

Black intentionality for MHS may begin with surface level visuals but, staffing is arguably the most important part of their intentionality. When you enter the office, you are greeted by an entirely Black front office staff. In the 40 years that MHS has operated, only four principals have led the school, all of whom have been Black. The current principal shared with me that the selection of Black principals has been intentional, primarily because local community organizer and advocate, "Sweet Alice Walker" who is seen by many as the founder of MHS, has been adamant about keeping Black administrators in place despite the changes in student demographics and neighborhood composition. In my conversation with participants and observations around the school, it became clear that having Black school leadership has been key



for creating a culture at MHS that protects Black students and prepares them for life after they graduate.

During my first day of observation, Mr. Smart shared that he makes it a priority to have Black staff well represented on campus, particularly because MHS has the second largest Black student population in the Los Angeles Unified School district. MHS has four administrators and only one of them is not Black. Additionally, approximately 25% of the teachers at MHS are Black, compared to the statewide average which is less than 4% (CBEDS; 2024). While a quarter of the staff being Black may not be significant in some locales, with the paucity of Black teachers in Los Angeles, this collective of Black educators is a point of pride for MHS. Mr. Smart said that he believes the presence of Black personnel on campus is important because it provides a sense of comfort and familiarity for Black students and their families. While conducting this research I often sat in the front office and witnessed Black students and caregivers engage in warm and congenial interactions with the office staff. These interactions were significant because the front office staff are the metaphorical and, at times, literal “gatekeepers” of the school and if Black stakeholders do not feel welcomed, it can impact their interactions and relationship with the school.

Mr. Smart also said that he deliberately uses his position of power to place Black parents in positions of power in the school environment. The current president of the PTA is a Black father, and the head of the Parent Center on campus is a Black mother. Having Black individuals in positions of power does not guarantee protection for Black students. However, because these leaders are also Black parents with children at the school, their vested interest in the success of Black students increases the likelihood of meaningful advocacy and support. Mr. Smart also

shared with me that his own son attends the school; he therefore seeks leaders with a similar investment to his own.

Several of the Black students who participated in my study reinforced the importance of having Black staff members. The following excerpt depicts how one student sees the role of Black staff:

I think it's more to it than that there's more Black teachers. And I felt like that helps students connect with teachers on a personal level, and when you see somebody like, that's "successful," so they'll be like, yeah, like I want to be that person or like they're, they're more comfortable with talking to that person.

According to this student, Black personnel provide a sense of comfort and safety for Black students. Still, it would be erroneous to claim that the mere presence of Black staff is all that Black students need to be successful in their school environment. The ways that Black educators show up matters because, similar to non-Black staff members, Black staff members can also operate from anti-Black logics that harm Black students. Black students need Black educators who see the best in them and who show up accordingly.

Another Black student shared that advocacy from Black staff on behalf of Black students is another critical element that makes him feel welcomed and supported. He explained:

Black staff ... just the overall like encouragement, because we have we have very active BSU club, who's like, who's always collaborating with our BSAP counselor. Our Black student achievement plan counselor at the end so once you have like a Black administrator and like Black students work together, then you have like this whole team who's always looking out for Black students. Like there's definitely a community that is there to support you. So, you have like the Black students who are your peers who you can relate to, and who are there to support you at like that student level and then you have administrators like Ms. Ada or Ms. Brantley like administrators who are advocating to the other adults at this school like "Nah we're going to make it right for them."

The last sentence of this excerpt is critical to highlight because the student reveals a belief that Black educators are willing to step up for Black students and combat harmful acts that are done by their colleagues. This element of protection for Black students by Black staff

members is paramount because without Black staff members to advocate on their behalf, many Black students are often subjected to inordinate harm. This example underscores that while Black students benefit from having Black staff in schools, it is crucial that these staff members hold roles with power and influence. Black students need advocates who can shape policies, make decisions, and implement changes that directly impact their educational experiences, rather than being limited to support roles such as janitors or cafeteria staff. The following example occurred during a day of observation and directly connects to the idea of projection for Black students.

One day while I was walking through the hallways with Mr. Smart, a Latinx school supervisor abruptly stopped us and told Mr. Smart that, “The football players are smoking weed.” Mr. Smart was immediately taken aback by this comment for numerous reasons, but seeing that this was a new staff member he first asked: “How do you know they’re football players?” The supervisor was unable to answer how she knew they were football players, but said they were Black and tall. Mr. Smart made it clear that he would look into the situation to see if he could identify who was smoking weed on campus. He then turned this incident into a teachable moment for that staff member, explaining to her that just because she sees a group of Black boys together, she should not assume that they are on the football team. He reiterated to her numerous times, “We do not label kids. We help kids. We do not profile.” Mr. Smart did not reprimand this staff member, but instead helped this staff member learn about her racial biases. As we walked away from this staff member he discussed how the labeling of Black boys in particular struck a sensitive chord for him because he is a father to two Black boys. This incident is important to unpack because Mr. Smart demonstrated his belief that staff can develop racial awareness to mitigate bias, yet he also believes in the power of racial intentionality in

staffing. I understand these two stances as connected in the sense that individual staff who are not Black can learn how to better serve Black students, but having substantial numbers of Black staff is important because of the way it shapes environmental culture. As we debriefed this situation, Mr. Smart spoke in-depth about the importance of staffing.

Intentionality with Blackness must encompass the non-Black staff that MHS hires as well. Mr. Smart said that he is aware of the low expectations that many people harbor about Black students and students from low-income communities. Therefore, in interviews and professional development he is intentional about disrupting harmful conceptualizations of Black students and their communities. Mr. Smart also shared with me different approaches he utilizes to disrupt these ideologies, he shared the following, “We take our teachers on a community tour. We drive around because we want them to also change their mindset that this community and show them the positives of the community.” Mr. Smart went on to share that it is imperative for non-Black teachers to witness quotidian instances within the community, such as Black fathers playing in the park with their children so they can change their perspectives. Additionally, he, along with the rest of his administration team, ensure that new hires are aware of the legacy of McCune to ensure they understand the expectation of success. His comments ran parallel to insights shared by Dr. Tyrone Howard—who served as a scholarly expert for this study—regarding strategies for improving non-Black teachers servicing of Black students:

They need to see examples of Black success because I think for a lot of non-Black and obviously whites since that's the majority of our teachers, a lot of White people just don't think that Black success or Black excellence is a possibility, or they don't think it's a reality. So, when and where you can, you have to lift up examples of Black success, not in the individual cases. But like enlarge case.

Both Dr. Howard and Mr. Smart offered comments that suggest they recognize that we cannot ask educators to do something they do not deem possible. Therefore, if we want educators to

contribute to Black student success, we must first make sure they know it is possible. Such a culture is set at the beginning of the year according to Mr. Smart, but he remains firm and consistent throughout the year. In an interview with one of the French teachers at MHS, the educator explained how Mr. Smart has been adamant about getting more Black students to take AP foreign language courses:

I am the only French teacher at McCune who was teaching an AP language. And then I'm the only one who had African American students in my AP class. And one day our principal Mr. Smart asked me to share in a staff meeting what I am doing to get Black students in my class because we need more Black students taking AP language courses.

This is significant because it demonstrates a leader who refuses to accept Black disproportionality and speaks, once again, to a school culture that insists correcting disparities with Black students.

### Instruction & Curriculum

Tailoring school environments to the needs of Black students must extend beyond policy and include school practices. Several teachers spoke openly about how they believe a “generic” education grounded in whiteness is a disservice to Black students and that they aspire to provide Black children the educational specificity they know is required for Black students to succeed not just at MHS, but in their years after leaving MHS. A teacher I spoke with shared the following when explaining the purpose behind her pedagogical and curricular approaches:

I know some, you know, some teachers who are about, you know, culturally responsive pedagogy, don't believe in the idea of like code switching and all that idea of all of those ideas. But realistically, I mean, we're not in a world yet where if you come in there speaking in Ebonics, that someone's gonna respect you the same, like you have to be able to know when you are in a safe space to use those and when you need to straighten up a little bit more. And I want them to be aware of how to navigate those situations, so I use my teaching for more than content.

The way this particular teacher approaches the classroom is fundamentally different than what Black students often experience in school, and while all teachers may not have this same

philosophy, Black students reported an awareness of these “customized,” classrooms. An 11<sup>th</sup> grade student commented:

You have teachers who ditch that curriculum and teach you know what they see like, it's going to be successful for that student. Teachers, like, okay, so the curriculum you know, you get your textbooks every year, blah, blah. I have had teachers who are like, no, this is not going to help you guys be successful. I'm going to teach you about your culture and stuff that's going to help you navigate the world to be successful.

The student's statement that “ditching” the curriculum is key for Black student success speaks to the oppositional nature of schooling for many Black students. The Black students I interviewed at MHS largely attributed the success of the schools Black students to the school's willingness to be different from the norm when it came to educating them.

From a curricular standpoint, Mr. Smart explained to me that all educators are encouraged to provide students with “culturally relevant content” that is reflective of students' lived realities. In many secondary institutions, there is a belief that core content mastery should be the priority for ensuring that students are eligible for college. At MHS, however, there is an ardent belief that rigorous high-quality content goes hand and hand with rich culturally reflective material. Moreover, a veteran teacher at MHS shared that, for Black students in particular, to keep high schoolers motivated and engaged, you need to provide them with content that will, “make them like your class.” Aligned with this sentiment, in one of the classrooms I observed at MHS (12<sup>th</sup> grade AP Literature), the students read a book entitled, *The Fall of Rome*. The novel chronicles the story of a Black high schooler from a predominately Black community who transfers to an all-White elite boarding school and is suddenly forced to navigate racial hostility and isolation. The day I sat in the class, the students discussed the protagonist's tenuous relationship with the only Black staff member on campus and students got into a passionate debate about race and the responsibility to “look out for one another.” After the class, the

teacher informed me that this was not the typical book for an AP literature class, but she intentionally included readings such as this one because her students “need it.” When I asked her what she meant by “need it,” she stated:

The majority of my students come from communities with people that look like them. Many of them will go on to colleges where they are one of few [Black students]—just like I was. So I try to give them materials that can prepare them unlike I was.

Such intentionality is only possible with teachers who remain firm in their advocacy for Black students and see their teaching as more than just preparation for a test or assignment. Talking with me about this class, a student said: “Ms. Paul is a good teacher because we talk about real stuff. It’s not just about a right answer with her. I want to learn not just write stuff. Critical thinking is important.” This student later shared that she would be attending UC Riverside in the fall and reading books like *The Fall of Rome* helped her feel both academically and emotionally prepared for what she will encounter in college.

At McCune high school, culturally rich Black content did not just live in core content areas as is commonly found in many academic spaces. In one Spanish class I observed, the teacher had pictures up around the room of historical Afro-Latina figures —many of whom appeared to be phenotypically Black. When sitting in on a higher-level science course (Patient Care CTE), students were provided real-life case studies of medical patients that they were tasked with investigating and identifying proper solutions. While this assignment may appear race-neutral on the surface, the instructor explained to me that she intentionally gives the students medical profiles that are common amongst Black folks so students begin to understand health related hardships that have befallen their own communities.

Intentionality with Blackness was felt in nearly every classroom I entered during my observations, whether via the visuals around the classroom, or the content students were

learning. But the two courses in particular that shined above the rest regarding their intentionality were African American Literature and African American History. At the secondary level, before observing those courses, I had yet to encounter class sessions or curricula that allow students to engage in such in-depth discussions about race and anti-Black racism while also making parallels to contemporary issues. The overarching theme of the African American History course is the evolution of Blackness in the United States from slavery, to Jim Crow, to mass incarceration. The instructor of the course is a Black woman and MHS alum who majored in African American Studies in college. She explained that her aim is to give students a broader perspective on how change has occurred historically and how they can apply it to their current context.

My favorite discussion I observed in her class was an intense debate on whether or not Black activists should have “fought back” during the violent attack on Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965. Many of the Black students argued passionately that they would have turned the entire scene into a brawl but were stumped by the opposition who argued that consequences to doing so at such an event would have negatively reverberated throughout the entire community. As the conversation intensified, the teacher expertly paused the discussion and had students journal their arguments using her own argument framing, which she called CERC (claim, evidence, reason, conclusion). This brief pause for students to journal and gather evidence brought a richness, depth, and complexity to the discussion. When I came back the next day, students were no longer arguing about the issue anecdotally, but instead were using multiple sources of evidence they had gathered to make points. The teacher held students to rigorous academic standards while also encouraging them to imagine radically. This was an instructive moment for me as a researcher.

The African American Literature class session had less discussion than the African American History course, but it was intentional about presenting Black authors. In conversation



with the instructor, she shared that as an undergraduate English major, she yearned for Black authors to be in conversation with esteemed White authors who are famed for their canonical texts. The teacher for the course, Ms. Edwards, told me that her primary passion behind teaching the course is exposing Black students to literary work that deserves the same acclaim as the works they may read in their English AP and Honors courses. The days I sat in on their classes students were reading Toni Morrison's, *Bluest Eye* and preparing "I am" poems to describe the feelings of the different characters in the novel. The Black students appeared to be enthralled in the content. Some students shared with me that their favorite feature of the course, was being able to fulfil their English requirement while taking a course they actually enjoyed.

MHS is a shining example of how a place of learning can be crafted for the success of Black students. MHS has everything you would expect to see from a high performing high school as far as resources and access to higher level courses, but leadership and staff also go the extra mile to ensure that Black students see themselves and their community represented in a positive light at all levels of schooling. The stellar academic performance of Black students at MHS is a shining example of what is possible when we craft spaces for Black students, rather than asking Black students to conform to spaces.

#### *Redd Elementary School*

I observed that both school sites were exemplary in intentionally crafting spaces for the academic success and overall wellness of Black students. Yet, how each school demonstrated Black intentionality was vastly different. MHS was founded with the intention of creating a stellar academic space for Black students. By contrast, Redd elementary school had a school leader who recognized the need for change after several decades of declining student performance at the school.

RES sits at the foot of one of the wealthiest Black communities in the entire country (see contextual breakdown). While neighborhood socio-economic status is typically a strong predictor of school quality and student performance in the United States, in 2015 Redd was, by many standards, a failing academic institution. Though the racial composition of the school was over 80% Black, the school operated in the same fashion regarding educating these students as any other school within the district. That was until 2016 when a new school leader, Dr. Canady, applied to have the school become a district pilot school, which would allow the school to have an added level of autonomy compared to other schools in the district regarding matters of staffing, curriculum, and programing. Dr. Canady told me that she firmly believes academic achievement is directly correlated to the way students think and feel about themselves and their community. Her belief as a school leader was that if she could make Black students feel a sense of connection to and belonging in their learning environment, this would in turn lead to increased academic performance. According to Dr. Canady, one of the first steps that was taken was repainting the exterior of the school to reflect the cultural and ethnic background of the students who attend the school. Dr. Canady explained her thinking behind this change:

First just visually, we were able to have these murals done, and like the whole school is completely, it used to just look so just, I mean just drab and now, I mean just, again, everywhere you look just outside just on the walls to inside the classrooms to the people walking all through the space, they get to see themselves. And to have that feeling of just this connection from when I leave home to when I get to school, I don't have to like turn off who I am or hide underneath the hood, or, you know, pretend that I'm not this or I haven't seen that like it's just it's just a it's a connector.

Dr. Canady talked about how she wanted the school to function as an extension of home for Black students. She wanted students to feel that “going to my school does not mean leaving my community,” but rather it means being embraced and celebrated for who you are as a person. The creation of this sense of belonging did not stop with the environmental aesthetics. Dr. Canady

changed the mascot of the school from an eagle to a Sankofa bird, an African Andinkra symbol which represents a connection to past wisdom. The intentionality with Blackness quickly became infectious throughout the school environment, and all educators on campus employed culturally responsive practice.

### School Staff

A yard supervisor at RES shared that cultural responsiveness even extends to how students enter the school:

We do everything to support Black student achievement from the way we greet the children when they come in in the morning. It's always, you know, three people before they get onto campus, saying good morning, good morning. So, we start off by making them feel welcome. And from there we go on to...we have affirmations that we do with them. We have a motto that the children repeat on a consistent level, we have virtues that the children recite, and learn and understand what they mean. Understand how you are supposed to behave, within those virtues, and they come from the virtues African principles that Black children need to thrive.

Dr. Canady explained that intentionality with Blackness is ingrained in every minute of the day that Black students are on campus. Students at RES are also surrounded by a majority-Black staff. At the time of my research, over half of the teachers at the school were Black, the entire administration team was comprised of Black women, and the office staff were all Black. The overwhelming presence of Blackness from a staffing standpoint was not an accident but rather intentionally infused by school leadership to ensure that Black students felt an extension of home when they were at school. One RES teacher explained the benefits of Black children being surrounded by Black staff with the following statement:

Black children see Black teachers more, you know, you can go to Redd and have a Black teacher, every single year. With some schools, you can go to school for 12 years without seeing a single Black teacher. So, I think that is really exciting, and it gives them a sense of connection. And that somebody wants them to succeed.

This quote speaks to the benefits educators associate with Black representation for Black students in academic environments. RES of course has non-Black staff members as well. The school's leadership remains firm in its expectations of non-Black educators' engagement with Black students, as the following assertion from an Assistant Principal Mrs. Curry conveys:

These are our children, this is what you have to do, because we have a pilot that dictates that you are going to be reading culturally relevant instructional material to the children, you are going to use them when you're writing, math problems. You know you are going to consider their culture, consider their language, consider who is sitting in front of you before you ever pick up a pencil and decide what it is that you're going to teach, or to plan, you need to know who's in your chairs.

Throughout the above statement, Mrs. Curry uses key phrases such as us, we, and you that communicate a collective expectation amongst Redd staff for non-Black folks that enter the school.

Leadership at RES refused to allow non-Black staff members who enter their space to compromise this safe and welcoming of Black children in any way, form, or fashion. My research revealed that the intentionality with Blackness by Black educators that specifically pertains to safety is a primary reason why many of the parents interviewed in this study sent their children to RES in the first place. One parent explained her reason for enrolling her child at RES the following way:

Not only was it good academically, but it taught them what it is to not only be a high achiever, but to be an African American high achiever. And, you know, to be proud of that and who you are. And one of my first decisions was that I really want my son to know who he is; to get that foundation. And my son is biracial. Okay. His mother is Mexican. And so, I wanted him to get that foundation. So, wherever he went in the world, he would know who he is first and foremost, but then, secondly, to also have the strong academics behind him. So that was it and then walking around the campus. And you know, walking in classes and seeing teachers that looked like us and what they were teaching. You know, it was it was I mean; it was a decision that was made before we even left the campus.

During this interview, another parent explained his rationale for choosing RES in relationship to his children's identities as both Black and male:

I knew that RES was a school that focused on cultural competence and for the students and use the culturally responsive texts, and other things that were really kind of just unique to the campus. We have three Black sons, so you're looking for an environment that would not make them feel criminalized in their school setting ...we wanted to give them the opportunity to kind of you know, have a good start with at least their self-esteem and their concept of self with good foundational basics to also make them successful in the future.

While parents explained different intentions and motivations behind choosing RES, the common throughline was wanting their children to not be penalized for being Black and desiring a school environment where their children could establish a foundational sense of identity in which Blackness is positive part of their identity. This directly aligns with what Dr. Na'ilah Nasir sees as an essential element for successfully educating Black children. In our conversation about Black student success, Dr. Nasir explained the following:

It's a thing, I as a parent, was very dogmatic about making sure my kids had I think it's important and when I say identity, what I mean is, you don't think being Black is bad, you think it's a good thing, you draw strength from it. You see power and beauty in it. And both are like the Blackness part of it.

We cannot expect Black children to succeed in spaces where their Blackness is used as a mark against them. It is not enough to just have Black people on campus so that Black students can see staff members who look like them, educators and other adults on the school site must go out of their way in all aspects of schooling to affirm Black students' Blackness. At RES one of the primary ways that affirmation was achieved occurred through the implementation of culturally responsive curriculum.

### Instruction & Curriculum

RES school leaderships prides itself on being able to provide Black students with an educational experience that is culturally responsive, while maintaining academic rigor. There is often a false premise in education that providing students with culturally rich content comes at the expense of high-quality rigorous instruction. In my observation of the teachers at Redd I

found that culturally responsive teaching and high-quality instruction were not mutually exclusive. In numerous classrooms I observed teachers seamlessly integrate culturally responsive practices into rigorous, high-quality instruction. Teachers at RES shared that their job is more difficult than teachers at other schools because they have to create their own (culturally responsive) lesson plans and curriculum for the year, but they feel this work is worth it because of how it is received by students. One teacher at RES explained how she implores Black intentionality in her work in the following way:

I believe in the classroom that you can do one or two things; you can teach the California standards to the letter, what they would consider a form of education that's kind of teaching to the test and teaching directly just based on the skills that they need. Or you can take those same standards and you can wrap those into culturally relevant material. It's a more challenging school for educators. I will say that because we are at a pilot school, we have our own autonomy to build our curriculum. So grade levels get together we plan more, it takes more planning time. It takes more thinking as a as a teacher, you have to be a little bit more creative, but to apply those same standards, to what's relevant for those students. So no, we don't we don't go in a classroom and just simply flip open a book.

The above quote's content is integral to the pedagogical culture at RES because it is an explicit recognition of the ways in which Whiteness dominates learning materials in the United States. In many public schools, White children are provided affirming and reflective materials from the time they enter school, and RES goes above and beyond to ensure that Black students receive the same treatment. RES educators are even mindful of the ways in which Blackness is defined and understood within their school.

Though rarely explored in research about Black students, there is a wealth of ethnic diversity within the Black population in public schools. In the United States, one in five Black people are immigrants or the children of immigrants (PEW research, 2019). I learned from many of the key stakeholders at RES that a robust conceptualization of Blackness is paramount for ensuring that materials provided to Black students are reflective of the diversity within Blackness

and not grounded in harmful monolithic notions of Blackness. During our focus group conversation, Mrs. Curry shared the following:

And so, when we say Black children, we cannot make the assumption that all Black children are African American descendant[s] of slaves. Because a lot of the kids that are in public school now, aren't. You've got your Ethiopian children at our campus. We have a lot of Ethiopian children. We have Nigerian students... We have a Black French kid. This year, and another one, you know whose first language is French, and another one, who's a (inaudible). I'm just going back in my mind thinking of the different languages that we have that we look at.

This quote from Dr. Canady highlights how assumptions about Black students often impact the efficacy of well-intended changes in policy and practice. From the moment Black students enroll at Redd, there are exposed to a plethora of deliberate practices that are intended to disrupt common assumptions about Black people. For example, the first book students read when they enter first grade at Redd is *Africa is Not a Country* by Dipo Faloyin. The book was written to debunk stereotypical conceptualizations of Africa that many young people develop through miseducation in school. The first-grade teacher I spoke to shared that it was integral for Black students to begin with this particular book because they, “need to understand self and where they come from, and then understand the [Black] people around them.” This was just one example of how Black students demonstrated an appreciation for their school’s intentionality with Blackness.

During informal discussions, Black students at Redd often expressed their enjoyment of learning from a curriculum that celebrates and affirms Blackness, as well as their appreciation for having Black teachers. The following quotes are examples of how Black students expressed their appreciations of Blackness at Redd. One fourth grade student specifically focused on the benefits of Black history and his sense of self,

Jaleel: Do you feel like there are benefits to being Black at RES?

Shaun: Maybe you get a bit of your own history, like, where I come from and where I started from and stuff like that.

J: So why is that important to you to find out that kind of stuff?

S: Because I probably would have gotten confused if somebody asked me where I was from or who I was and I wouldn't know, and I would be really confused.

Another student, fifth grader Aniya, shared her perceived benefits of having Black teachers:

Jaleel: Okay, so you said you have Black teachers. Does that help you as a Black student to have a Black teacher, does it matter to you?

Aniya: It does help in some ways, because they know more Black history and dig deeper into it.

J: Is there anything else in that secret Redd sauce that you can tell us about?

A: Maybe that just because it's a Black school doesn't mean it's bad.

Aniya's last line in particular speaks volumes because it shows an intentional challenging of a dominant narrative around Blackness that has clearly been communicated to students. Educators at Redd consistently shared that Black students deserve to see themselves in the content they learn. One could argue the pedagogical and curricular mission of Redd is best summarized by a teacher who said, "We use materials that reflect the children that are sitting in the chairs in our classrooms." While all students I interviewed had an appreciation for this, Black students who had attended other elementary schools had a particular appreciation for RES' intentional curriculum. One of the transfer students, Nate, a third grader, shared the difference in Redd's approach from his prior schools:

Nate: At my other school we didn't talk as much about Black stuff at the school. At my old school. The only person that we will, that was what we learned about was Martin Luther King.

Jaleel: So did that bother you that you didn't talk about more than just Martin Luther King at your old school.

N: Yeah.

J: Why?

N: Because I want to know what else happened. Why are things the way they are.

Having attended schools where a more comprehensive perspective of Blackness was not the norm, Nate was able to highlight how his prior school's traditional curriculum narrows understandings of self for Black students. However, it is important to note that the effects of



strong culturally rich academic content is still highly dependent on the educators who deliver it. During my research at RES, students often spoke about their preference for Black educators. In the following excerpt Orlando explains a nuanced appreciation for Black teachers that extended to simple social interactions around campus:

Jaleel: Okay, so also, I know a lot of Redd teachers are Black teachers. Do you think that makes a difference in terms of creating a community?

Orlando: It's cool that you have Black teachers and mostly Black students, because, like if I make a joke, like, because that like, it helps that they're Black because they might understand the joke more than other teachers.

Something as simple as being able to joke with educators with a sense of familiarity is emblematic of a place where your cultural cues are understood. When students feel that their ways of being are validated and recognized within school setting, it creates a sense of belonging that is crucial for students in school success. Another student even shared that seeing Black leaders around the campus and in classrooms helped him learn better. More than anything, the students I spoke to expressed a feeling of comfort—as if the school was an extension of their community/homelife.

In my time at Redd Elementary School, I witnessed a K-5 academic space with an explicitly asset-based conceptualization of Blackness that permeated all aspects of the school from the aesthetic on the exterior of the school to the content taught inside of classrooms. These academic spaces tremendously increase the likelihood of Black students being successful but are still only a part of what makes schools effective in educating Black students.

## **Conclusion**

One of the key reasons Black students succeed at McCune and Redd is that both schools prioritize creating spaces where Black students feel seen, valued, and supported, ensuring that their unique needs are embedded into the fabric of school decision-making, resources, and

pedagogical practices. The strategies outlined in this section vary by school, emphasizing that there is no singular approach to Black intentionality. The only consistent throughline is a deliberate and intentional commitment to presenting Blackness in ways that affirm its value and richness. Without this intentionality, the default is an anti-Black framing, that often perpetuates failure for Black students. Intentionality with Blackness requires actively seeking to disrupt anti-Blackness through thoughtful, purposeful actions that center Black experiences, celebrate Black identities, and ensure that Blackness is engaged with in ways that honor its complexity and contributions.

## CHAPTER VI

### **Construct # 2: Comprehensive ecosystem of supports (CES)**

At both school sites I discovered a comprehensive ecosystem of support (CES) that was a key factor to Black student success. I define a CES as a complex network of communal assistance shaped by school culture and personnel, fostering connections and support among all stakeholders toward shared goals. It is imperative to frame this concept as an ecosystem because interdependence is a core concept of a ecosystems; no organism thrives without the support of others (Bogers et al., 2019) . Similarly, within school context, an effective ecosystem of support results in mutually beneficial symbiotic relationships where all parties benefit from collaboration and community; no actor performs to the best of their ability in isolation.

The concept of an ecosystem was first developed by ecologist Arthur Tansley in 1935 to describe the way non-living and living organisms interact to form functional units. Tansely's work became foundational for the field of ecology because it highlighted the intricate interactions that must take place within an environment in order for all of its organism to thrive (Tansley, 1935). Throughout the years, this concept has been adapted and applied to other fields to describe complex and interdependent systems where multiple stakeholders collaborate in order to achieve desired results (Letaifa et al., 2013; Moore, 2006; Oestreicher et al., 2018). For instance, in economics the concept of ecosystems is often used to describe the interconnectedness between institutions, regulatory bodies, and consumers which all coalesces to create value within a given industry (Clark et al., 2018). Within education, ecosystems are often applied within the context of learning (Hecht & Crowley, 2020; Niemi et al., 2014). An ecosystems-framed approach to learning suggests that students learn across multiple environments, and collaboration between these environments and the stakeholders within them

enhance student learning (Hecht & Crowley, 2020). I am extending this literature by applying the concept of ecosystem within the context of in-school support for all stakeholders.

Similar to the concept of ecosystems is ecology, a comprehensive ecosystem of support in schools are designed—at their very core—to ensure that all stakeholders have their needs met. Receiving the requisite support to thrive enables stakeholders to perform to their best ability, improving the school environments for all stakeholders. For example, research shows that when teachers perceive their administrators and fellow teachers as supportive, their overall satisfaction with their job increases, which improves their service of students (Francois & Quartz, 2021). Employment of a CES is particularly essential for schools in low-resource environments because collaboration and interconnectedness amongst stakeholders fosters a collective approach to addressing challenges that might otherwise overwhelm individual efforts.

An ecosystem of support is also vital for schools servicing Black students because they counter White supremacist notions of individualism and meritocracy in education by promoting community values and mutual dependence, both within and beyond school environments.

DiAngelo states that:

Individualism does more than posit that opportunity is equal and people arrive at their achievements through hard work alone, thus positioning dominant group members in a favorable light; it simultaneously obscures structural barriers and positions members of social groups who have achieved less in an unfavorable light. (p.5)

It is crucial to instill communal values and disrupt White supremacist notions of individualism within schools serving Black students because communal orientations reject the false belief that Black students' underperformance in school is due to individual lack of effort or grit. Moreover, because of the historical inequities Black folks have endured in the United States, we frequently are not afforded the privilege, capital, or resources to succeed without collective support. A

collaborative approach toward schooling enables schools to leverage community assets, share resources, and create more sustainable solutions to ongoing issues.

The comprehensive ecosystem of support I observed at Redd and McCune fostered a sense of belonging and support among all participants—administrators, teachers, students, and caregivers. My findings revealed that school personnel establish this norm amongst all individuals within the environment, and when applied properly such support becomes infectious and spreads to all stakeholders. This intricate web of support is especially critical for the success of Black students because it positions Black folks as valued contributors, disrupting their historical ostracization within school context. Additionally, this support is crucial for Black students as communal ties can mitigate challenges such as imposter syndrome, isolation, and othering.

#### *McCune High School*

One of the most salient observations I experienced throughout my time at MHS was the sense of community that existed amongst all the campuses stakeholders. During my 50 hours of observation, I witnessed interactions between school personnel and Black students and their families that demonstrated meaningful connections were in place numerous times. For example, when observing a 12<sup>th</sup> grade science class, I saw the principal, Mr. Smart, pull a Black student aside and quickly remind him, “The FAFSA is due in two weeks we still haven’t received yours.” This may seem mundane, but in my experience spending time in schools, it is rare for a school leader to be that aware of a particular student’s academic progress. On another afternoon, I walked into a classroom where students were eating lunch while preparing for an AP exam because a few teachers had offered a voluntary “lunch-bunch” space to help students during their free time. Teachers’ willingness to give up their personal time during lunch demonstrates a care and commitment to students that extends beyond their normative responsibilities. These are just

two of the countless examples of support I observed but, I attempting to illustrate how MHS is different from many other school environments. I probed Mr. Smart about the establishment of this culture, and he insisted I attend the “New Parent Orientation” for incoming ninth graders. Mr. Smart informed me that holding the orientation was key for communicating the MHS culture to new students and their families. In this section, I detail what I observed while attending orientation because it provides an overview of how the CES is cultivated and sustained.

### Culture of Support

McCune High School’s New Parent Orientation was held on a Saturday morning and primarily led by current Black students. As you entered the campus, current students greeted incoming students, their parents, and caregivers, providing them with information for the day and guiding them to the gym. Mr. Smart began by clearly stating that the expectation for all students who attend McCune is to go to college, and that he sent both of his sons to MHS because of the rigorous academic experience it provides its students. Mr. Smart later explained that he emphasizes having his own children attend the school as a way to connect with parents. As he explained expectations to students and their families, he also carefully detailed the multitude of ways that student success is achieved, and that support was the cornerstone of the work done at McCune. He made it clear that the staff at MHS, including himself, will do their part to help students succeed, but they need students’ caregivers to do their part as well. To drive this point home, he then called up three parent volunteers (all of them were Black) to answer questions and speak to their experiences on a panel.

The purpose of the panel was to provide other parents with the “tips for success” at MHS that they learned during their child’s matriculation through the school. The parent panelists began by explaining what the school needs from them as caregivers. The first recommendation

given to caregivers was the need to hold students to the same high expectations as the school holds them. From the parent presenters' standpoint, this meant ensuring that students are doing homework on a nightly basis because as one panelist said, "They do have it," consistently reiterating expectations of reaching college admission. Parent presenters then went on to inform parents that they should put strict routines in place for their children to ensure that they remain disciplined and stay apace of their work. For instance, a panelist shared they she limits her child's screentime to prevent them from spending inordinate amounts of time playing video games or on their phones. As the parent presenters explained MHS's expectations for parents and discussed the needs of the parents themselves, they acknowledged that while providing a structured environment can be challenging, parents should not feel alone. As one parent noted, "The staff also love your kids like no other, that tough love that kids need." The parent presenters then began to chronicle the multitude of ways that their children received various types of support at MHS, ranging from tutoring to receiving basic necessities such as food.

One of the mothers on the panel spoke glowingly about her daughter's time at McCune and primarily attributed her daughter's admission to UCLA to MHS. She made it clear it was not just her daughter who was able to experience MHS, but that it was a communal experience that involved their entire family. She explained, "It wasn't just my journey with my husband trying to get my daughter to college, everybody here loved on her." All of the parents on the panel had students in college or headed to college and said that these realities would not have been possible without MHS and their involvement in their child's education. The presenters encouraged parents to attend Mr. Smarts' monthly "Coffee with the Principal" meeting during which caregivers are invited to ask pertinent questions or share concerns they might have, and to build relationships with Mr. Smart. Additionally, the orientation's parent panelists recommended

joining the high school's Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA), so that new MHS parents could be involved in decision making for their children's education. The presenters also shared that a parent meeting is hosted for each grade level four times a year and that participation is paramount. It is important to note that all of the aforementioned parent events occur in a hybrid fashion (in-person and on zoom) to increase parent participation. The resounding message of the panel was that McCune does not produce stellar outcomes by itself, student successes are only possible with buy-in and collective input and support from all stakeholders.

As the panel ended, Mr. Smart closed out orientation by further explaining the plethora of support and resources available to students and their families. He shared that MHS is a 1:1 school, which means that all students would be provided with a Chromebook. He continued to emphasize how much MHS needs engaged parents for students to succeed and encouraged parents "not [to] fall off because students are in high school, but stay active by making connections with teachers to show them your involvement." Relatability was a critical element to how Mr. Smart communicated with parents as he closed by simply stating, "We need you to help us cultivate this environment of success. I am a parent of a McCune student. I'm not asking you to do anything I won't do." It was clear from the new student orientation that Mr. Smart believes deeply in this "formula" for success he and his staff have created at MHS. The formula for student success at MHS depends on parent engagement and accountability/discipline, that supports the works already being done by school staff with students in school. Mr. Smart was clear that the formula helps to instill a culture at MHS that inundates students with support in all aspects of school, hence the framing of the concept of comprehensive ecosystem of support.

The spiel that Mr. Smart and the parent presenters gave at the parent orientation directly aligned with the concept of a comprehensive ecosystem of support that I consistently observed



and heard from participants while conducting my research at McCune. The village that Mr. Smart frequently spoke about begins with school administration constantly communicating to all students and their families that students would be supported to succeed. To fully explain CES, I next explain how support occurs in a trickle-down, yet symbiotic, way between stakeholders.

### Support for Teachers

Teachers have the most consistent contact with and potential impact on students. It is therefore critical that they feel supported and understand how to best support students. During my interview with an administrator at McCune, she explained that when teachers are hired school administrators are adamant about communicating the site's culture to them,—a culture grounded in strong relationships and support for students. Another administrator explained the following, “So our message when you come in, is without relationships you can't teach anything. So, you have to make the time upfront, and I don't care about you getting through all the curriculum.” The prioritization of relationships, even above curricular content, is seldom found within school settings. It was apparent in my conversations with administrators and teachers that building relationships with students can be an arduous and timely endeavor, but MHS leadership takes various steps to make sure that teachers are supported in those efforts. Mr. Smart explained that support in the following way:

Its differentiation right? And so just like classroom instruction needs to be differentiated, support for teachers needs to be differentiated. So, we have new teacher meetings that are in smaller groups to help support with getting to know the kids, but then we also have a lot of teachers that have been here for a long time, that also help with their colleagues in dealing with different situations, right. But then some of that differentiated support is one-on-one, then after an observation we might notice maybe some things that we may want you to grow on, then that's an individual conversation, right? But we also have some professional development that we use to support that too.

As a former teacher, Mr. Smart approaches teacher growth and development from the student's perspective. MHS sets a common goal for all teachers to engage in relationship-centered praxis,

but there is also an understanding that achieving that goal requires that different teachers receive different support. In addition to the supports explained above, an instructional leader at MHS informed me that teachers use the Kagan method, of which he provided the following background:

Spencer Kagan<sup>6</sup> is as cooperative learning structure that teaches teachers how to have a collaborative environment in the classroom, teaches them discussion techniques, teaches them how to engage all students so where they're not just doing this by themselves. They are engaging with their peers. With positive affirmations.

It was evident to me during my observations at MHS that teachers are held to high standards in their relational interactions with students, but also concerning their quality of teaching. All newly hired teachers are assigned a veteran teacher as a mentor to guide them through their first two years at MHS. Additionally, there is at least one Nationally Board-Certified teacher designated for each core content area at MHS; they are assigned to any teachers who may be struggling with their content delivery.

To assess how teachers felt about the school administration's expectations of them and the support the school provided for them to develop pedagogically, I spoke to a number of them about their job satisfaction. Some of the most informative conversations I had in my study were with teachers who had experience instructing at other schools within the district before working at MHS. When we spoke, several of these teachers repeatedly used the word "support" as a critical distinction between MHS and their previous schools. When speaking with a ninth-grade biology teacher about his experience at McCune, he said it was vastly different than his time at Oak High School (a school in the area with a similar student population). He explained the

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<sup>6</sup> The **Spencer Kagan model** is a cooperative learning framework designed to promote student engagement and social skills through structured group activities. The Kagan model focuses on ensuring equal participation, accountability, and positive interdependence among students, fostering both academic achievement and social-emotional growth.

difference: “At Oak High school, the principal constantly tore you down, but at MHS they build you up. Anything you need they are receptive.” The teacher went on to describe the multitude of ways he felt “blamed” for students’ poor performance at his previous school but has found that at MHS, poor student performance is just a sign students need more “support” rather than being reprimanded.

I interviewed a Spanish teacher who previously worked for another school in the district who shared similar reflections on MHS being a supportive environment, by saying that “in my time here I’ve found that the kids are similar but parent support here is different.” She went on to explain that she could count on parents to hold students accountable when issues arose in class, an experience she was not used to at her previous school. Another teacher I spoke with explained the difference between MHS and another school as the former being more familial:

I think in the culture of school, because for me, Odmont (previous school) and MHS it's like day or night. I love my students there, but I think that the culture of the school wasn't as powerful as the culture at MHS, because we are talking in you know, in at MHS, we are talking about family. We want the students to feel that belonging, you know part of the community.

One of the major findings in my research of the CES at MHS is that support begets support, meaning that when people feel supported, they are more likely to support others. My interactions and interviews with staff revealed that because they felt supported, they in turn adopted similar attitudes in their interactions with students.

### Support for Students

At MHS, just as teachers are inundated with support, so too are students. When students first enroll at McCune they are required to participate in a summer bridge program designed to acclimate them to high school before beginning the fall semester of their ninth grade year. In the summer of 2023, students were required to read a book by MHS alum Jarvis Givens entitled,

*School Clothes*, to spark reflective conversations about the importance of school for minoritized communities and to prepare students for the academic rigor of high school. At McCune, when the school year begins, all students attend one-on-one meetings with their academic counselors, who (unlike at many other high schools) follow the same class of students for up to all four years of secondary school. MHS uses this student-counselor policy to ensure that students have continuity and a relationship with their academic advisor to decrease the likelihood of students taking classes that are neither required nor helpful to their academic trajectory. Additionally, academic counselors are responsible for holding students accountable for taking rigorous course loads to ensure college eligibility. When speaking with Conor about his counselor, he shared the following, “I for sure had experiences...I will try to put in classes, and I tried to pick a little Honors or pick and lil regular class and she’ll be like ‘Oh no. No, no, not you you’re Conor. I know your mom. You’re gonna put that AP down [on your list of registered classes]. You’re smart.” His student statement reveals that, at McCune, support also involves a belief and affirmation in students’ ability. Black students not only need access to rigorous courses, but they also need to believe they can succeed in these courses.

During students’ first few weeks at school, ninth graders are also paired with a peer mentor from the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> grade who has demonstrated excellence during his or her time at MHS, to provide freshmen with tips and guidance for their time at MHS. In addition to peer mentorship, as students matriculate through McCune, if they feel that they are in need of additional peer support, they can sign up for peer counseling and be assigned a high-achieving peer to assist them academically. Finally, from a mental health standpoint, MHS makes sure that students are aware of the myriad of mental health resources at their disposal. MHS employs a district-funded full-time psychiatrist and a social worker. The district did not always provide

schools with a full-time social worker, but because of MHS's emphasis on student mental wellness, the school has allocated dollars to have a full-time social worker on campus since Mr. Smart started at the school nine years ago. These different structures of support, while critical, are only as effective as the people who operate them, and fortunately at MHS, the personnel furthers the feeling of being supported for students.

In my opinion, the greatest validation of an effective ecosystem of support, comes from the perspective of the students this system of support is intended to benefit in the first place. During my observations in and around MHS, I witnessed a wealth of interactions between students and staff that demonstrated in-depth relationships which appeared to extend beyond normative student-teacher relationships. Whenever I arrived on campus for an observation, I would be escorted by a staff member to wherever I was assigned to observe that day, and as we ventured through the hallways, staff members consistently greeted and checked in on students they passed. A common phrase I heard staff and faculty state when students were seen in the hallway was, "Do you need anything?" rather than, "Get to class." I was at MHS numerous times during recess and lunch, and I along with other school personnel would observe lunch from a distance to ensure student safety. I was amazed by how often students walked up to educators just to strike up casual conversations with them about their families, interests, or aspirations. As a former classroom teacher, this signaled those students felt meaningful connections to their educators outside of academics.

One of the most powerful moments I observed was when a Black male student greeted Mr. Smart at lunch. Mr. Smart immediately stopped the young man and asked, "How are you doing?" The student responded that he was fine and attempted to walk away, but Mr. Smart again repeated his question, this time more slowly and with more intention. The student shared

that he was having some difficulty in math but felt confident that it would work out. This answer was apparently unsatisfactory to Mr. Smart, because in that moment he stopped everything he was doing and told the student to take out his math work. I watched for the next 15 minutes, as Mr. Smart took time out to tutor this student while still monitoring student safety during recess. When the bell rang Mr. Smart informed the student, he would be available any time before or after school if he needed any additional help. I share this story because when the leader of a school sets such an example of student support, it has a tremendous impact on the culture of a school. For teachers, seeing this level of care and attention is instructive to the kind of care they should provide students. Moreover, for students this moment demonstrates the level of commitment their staff have toward their success and wellness.

In my focus group conversations with Black students at MHS, they spoke in detail about individual actors on campus who provided them support during significant moments in their educational journey that made a personal difference. When asked about impactful adults on McCune's campus, one student shared, "I just want to say there's a lot of teachers within MHS that are life changing to a lot of kids. They show a lot of love even if we don't personally know the teacher." I thought this reflection was powerful because it seemed to reveal that teachers feel a responsibility to all students at MHS, not just the ones they teach. The Black students I spoke with also shared powerful narratives about the support they receive from school personnel in times of need. Christine shared numerous examples of one teacher's provision of support:

Tenth grade year Madam Trefique, she was my honors French teacher, and there were times where I just felt like giving up and I feel like I could go to her anytime. Or she would even like call me like into her office say, "I noticed you changing your behavior, like I know something's wrong." She'll specifically pull my grades from her office. And be like, what's going on with this test?... So, I think just having someone who cares, who's like, it might seem like annoying someone's pulling your grades but it's like, like, at least I know you care. So, like just her caring has really like influenced the way I like performed.

This level of care, particularly for a student who is already high achieving, shows the critical role of support and care for students beyond academic achievement. Asking this student about his grades, querying about her being okay, is just another example of how an ecosystem replete with care envelopes students with concerned adults. Raya, another student, detailed how her transformative school counselor, Miss Makin, made the biggest impact on her time at MHS:

She's my on-campus mom. Not only does she talk to my parents all the time, but like I go to her for a lot of things like in terms of grades. I can go in there, even though she's not a teacher, I go in there and talk about this bad teacher, that I just had last period and I'm not rocking with him, or like any type of advice that I need.

I was particularly struck by the phrase “on-campus mom”—this was not a term I had often heard in other school environments but in my time at MHS it was often used by teachers and students alike. Black students perceiving school staff as familial figures is reminiscent of African-American literature on fictive kinship that explains the importance of familial-like connections between Black folks (Taylor et al., 2013). This level of connectedness with staff appears to be a norm at MHS as indicated by another student who shared the following example:

Mr. Tyler, he's a teacher at MHS and it's just his class. There will be times where I really just will come in there just like I really didn't care. I was tired fed up and next thing you know he's like ‘Man snap out of it. You're him. You're good. You're a good writer. You are a good scholar just get through, like stop trippin.’ And it will work every time.

I included these individual narratives because these were clearly transformative moments for MHS students. In my conversation with several of them, they initiated discussion of the ideal teacher at MHS, the term used most often was “care.” Care, not just about students’ academic performance, but about them as people, as one student explained:

The teachers like they care about their students, and they want to see their students succeed. And not just they want to see them succeed. Like if talking about work, not just a push you to turn in your work like they actually care. Like they, they'll talk you through it.

The level of care and support students stated feeling from their teachers and staff was also reflected in the way they described relationships with each other.

The students in my study reported that one of the key elements of their own success at MHS was having peers who helped guide their journey and hold them accountable. This environmental norm between peers is best summed up by the following quote from eleventh grader Aaron:

The biggest thing for me was community building. I surround myself with people that are successful are willing to help me be successful, whether it's tutoring or anything like that. They're like, constantly affirm me and like making sure mentally and physically I'm okay, like I think the community plays a big part and like when you have this support system where some people might not have that at home, like being able to go to your group your circle and being able to like reaffirm that for yourself. I think that helps a lot.

This student's use of phrases such as community, support system, and circle conveys that this student was not experiencing school in isolation, but was instead surrounded by like-minded peers. According to students, support does not stop within the walls of MHS, what truly makes the CES at McCune special is that the greater community surrounding MHS supports the students as well. The Black students I spoke with shared that MHS's strong social reputation led to frequent affirmations of their potential from people in their community, which in turn motivated them to persevere and strive for success. An institution's social reputation is the perception that community members have of said institution based on its historical dealings within the community and the people that come from the institution (Cole, 2020). Exemplifying this, Desean shared,

Yeah, for me when I go to certain environments like where I grew up, they'll be like, "Oh you go to McCune you smart blah, blah, blah." And I will tell them my grades and they'll be like, "That's great. So yeah, keep pushing out here." So they support you because they want to see you win.



This quote is a counternarrative to the ways that smart Black students are often viewed in many inner-city communities of color. Rather than being ostracized or chastised for being academically adept, because of the CES cultivated at MHS, students are celebrated for their achievement. Another example of students being celebrated for academic success was shared when a student stated, “I definitely get praised a lot. Like, even if, like, I have all common core classes. If I told somebody like in the community, I went to McCune it’s instant love.” The level of love and support that student talked about experiencing was only possible because of the in-depth community engagement that takes place MHS to keep students connected to their community. Moreover, it speaks to the power of the community reputation of an institution when a space is created and ran by members of the surrounding community.

#### Support for Parents

Ecosystems thrive when all actors have their needs met, therefore a comprehensive ecosystem is incomplete without fulfilling the needs of caregivers. In my conversations with Black parents, the majority reported favorable experiences at MHS. Parents felt that their children’s academic and non-academic needs were met, and that the school responded well when they expressed concern. The unfortunate reality is that in many K-12 schools, when issues arise for Black students, their complaints about what they experience on site as well as the complaints of their parents typically are ignored and their issues are left unaddressed. In consideration of this reality, my interview protocol specifically asked parents to think of a time that their child needed advocacy at MHS and tell me how it was resolved.

The parent participants in this study were all selected on a volunteer basis at school wide events. All of the parent participants spoke highly of the ways in which school personnel responded to issues their children had on school grounds. One parent shared that when his

daughter first started attending MHS, he made it clear to staff he did not do, “texting or emails,” and that if there is a problem with his child, school personnel was to call him. He said that he felt respected as a parent during his daughter’s time there and that his preferred mode of communication has been adhered to by all parties at McCune. He also shared with me that there was a situation where his daughter was on the receiving end of verbal bullying, and when it was brought to the attention of school personnel, immediate action was taken and the offending student was punished. He said as a parent, he felt good knowing educators utilized this level of responsiveness. Another parent shared the following unfortunate incident:

I had a teacher who I thought said something inappropriate to my son. I don't think that staff should ever tell a child, "Go tell your mommy or daddy that." You have something you want them to know, you get on the phone. You go down to the office, you get on the phone, you call them. It's almost threatening and intimidating to a child. I had to go up there and I said if you thought that what you said to my son needed to be told to us. You should have said it to us first. That's a threat. I got the principal involved and she agreed with me and handled the situation.

These examples are crucial because I am in no way attempting to portray MHS as a perfect school environment. Unfortunate incidents that occur, but the how they are handled is a critical element of an effective CES.

Parents that I spoke to also talked about how they felt about the ways that their children and other students were supported. Each of the parents I spoke with shared that they frequently experienced positive contact with school personnel, such as when staff call parents just to praise their children and offer positive feedback about their performance and effort in class. I attended Back-to-School Night and in nearly every interaction, I witnessed between caregivers and their student’s teacher, the teachers were intentional in praising parents for their involvement and raising such wonderful young people. One of the parents I spoke with was inspired by the way teachers are even mindful of student’s basic needs. She stated:

When children come to her class, she tells them to go to the fridge and see if you see anything you like. That's what kids need. You know I was so happy. You know kids always want something, I told her whenever I go to Costco, I'm going to get to two boxes of that for your classroom. I haven't had time to go to Costco but I'm off three days now. I'll take one of my days to go over there and just get her some snacks that she can be using for her class. She says whenever they come, I tell them to go to the fridge and get anything you like. So I'm like yeah, I'm like someone should be supporting that.

This was yet another prime example of how, when stakeholders feel supported, they in-turn want to support other stakeholders. I believe the CES at McCune's meaningful buy-in from all stakeholders around a common goal is a replicable example for other K-12 schools.

### *Redd Elementary School*

Research suggests that a common attribute amongst effective school leaders is their ability to clearly communicate their vision for school culture to their staff (Khalifa et al., 2016).

At Redd Elementary School, the manner in which their comprehensive ecosystem of support manifested is reflective of Dr. Canady's vision of school culture, which she explains below:

I've given the visual before of like, I want our children to feel like they're just being wrapped up you know when you get ready to go to bed and it's like that warm, you know, pillow and blanket when you get ready to go to sleep—like they feel that level of just being loved and enveloped in all we do.

I open this section with the above quote because it explains much of the way Redd functions as a school site. The intentionality of crafting support is a key attribute of a CES and is meant to enfold students and their families in love and community in all that they do. Dr. Canady's sentiments align with Dr. Shaun Harper's perspective on key attributes of schools that are successful in educating Black children:

If I was still living in the northeast, it rains there, and it snows there. So, we're often talking about like protecting you know, oneself from the elements. Like you know, you gotta have a raincoat or an umbrella or snow boots or a heavy coat to protect yourself. I think in that same way schools should provide you know, protective space.

The administration and teachers at Redd are adamant about constructing safe academic spaces for Black students. In stark alignment with Dr. Harper's quote, one of the longest tenured teachers at RES shared that her primary goal when working with students is to make sure, "They feel safe, they feel protected." When she shared this with me, I began to wonder: What if all teachers framed their pedagogy and practice around wanting to make Black students feel protected and safe? Among my discovery of key attributes to Redds' ecosystem of support, educators choosing to operate from a frame of protection could not be overstated.

### Culture of Support

As in my findings at MHS, school leaders play a foundational role in cultivating the CES at Redd Elementary School. Redd administrators reported being adamant about creating an academic space where Black students and their families can be "whole." When I refer to "whole," I mean whole in the entirety of our vast cultural richness, and just as crucially, whole in our flaws without the fear of being policed or punished for them. In my conversations with, and observations of school administration, it was apparent that they hold educators to high expectations of creating meaningful connections with the students and families they serve. The school's connections with students and parents are intended to be genuine and transformative for students to ensure students' academic and non-academic needs are met. An administrator I spoke with best explained the school's institutional philosophy through the following examples:

Students need to know that somebody cares about you, somebody sees you, somebody understands the path that you are on. Somebody understands where you came from. Somebody understands that if you say you're hungry, they're not going to be like, "Oh my God, there's no food in the house. Nobody's cooking for you. What's going on?" [Pause] "It's okay, sweetie. Hold on a second, I got something that you can have." You know? It's a level of caring and nurturing, that, you know, Black folks give. That's innate within us, so it transfers on to the children and they see it they feel it. They feel like it's a family.

The anecdotal examples Ms. Johnson shared are unfortunately the unique experiences of many Black students who confide in school personnel about a need they might have for resources and are met with County- or social service-sanctioned surveillance rather than help. Teachers at Redd see themselves as advocates for students before educators, as evident from the following statement shared by a fourth-grade teacher:

I believe that I'm not only a voice of reason or safety for my children, but I'm also a voice of reason and safety for my parents, because they feel secure with me being there with their children. But that's because I've fostered those relationships with them. I understand the dynamic. I focus on who they are, first, and then we move through our curriculum. So, I spent an extensive amount of time building trust and letting them know that we're in this together, and for whatever for all intents and purposes like we say they're going to be with me and I'm still there for them.

When teachers approach their work with students from this perspective, it has a tremendous impact. Recognizing student success as a collective responsibility helps ensure that educators remain accountable and do not absolve themselves of responsibility for student academic challenges.

Providing resources and protection rather than punishment is a key feature of the CES at Redd. My research found that this non-punitive orientation is primarily derived from the perspectives that educators have of the supportive roles they play in the lives of their students. A distinctive characteristic I found amongst staff members at Redd was viewing themselves as familial figures in their students' lives. During a focus group interview, one school administrator described her role as, "Auntie," in the following statement:

I'm the Auntie, whose house you don't want to go over because I'm the one that's not gonna let you watch TV, but I love you, you know, that's coming off the bat we are family, everybody in here. These are your brothers, your sisters, and I'm that mean Auntie whose house you don't like to go over, and whenever I tell the kids that they laugh. So, it's, it's a connection.

Another teacher described herself as an additional grandmother:

I feel like sometimes our parents, drop their kids off like they're dropping their kids off at grandma's house right we're like the third grandmother. And the reason why we play that role is because number one, the kids feel safe. They feel like they're walking into an environment where they can be themselves.

This teacher pointed to safety; Black students feeling safe is an essential component to their academic success and holistic wellness, and consistently came up across both school sites. It is rare to see school personnel describe themselves in a familial-like fashion when referring to their relationships with students, but this speaks to the level of connection Dr. Canady hoped to create for Black students at Redd. The Black parents I spoke with further validated familial and protective values in the ways they described their children's experiences at Redd. One father shared:

And, you know, quite frankly, you know, there were times where my boy would cut up and I get a text, you know, "Hey, your kid is cutting up." And I don't know if you've heard this before, but with the exception of two male teachers these were all [emphasis in tone] Black women. These were Black women [emphasis] with kids. And, you know, they were like, "Look. Don't have me call your daddy." And I mean, like, one of the teachers was like, "oh don't, have me acting like your Auntie, I'm about to step out the teacher box" And so, there was a village type approach, which, in my opinion, was very good.

This father aptly described how staff members are able to leverage their familial-like connections with students and their families to hold students to high expectations. It became abundantly clear that the educators at Redd take on roles in the lives of Black students, reminiscent of the narratives that education historians such as Jarvis Givens (2021) and James Anderson (1988) recount of Black educators in the Jim Crow South. Black educational historians have described how in the Jim Crow South educators were often seen as surrogate parents and kin, forming deep and lasting relationships with students, who were nurtured and supported not only academically but also emotionally and socially, reflecting the communal nature of Black education in the segregated South.

Another parent also spoke candidly about feeling that the adults on campus serve as extensions of the family:

You know, like at his school, one of our favorite things has been Mr. White, who is a Black male teacher who has been a strong presence at Redd for many years, for almost a decade, and he was my son's third grade teacher. Who just really likes comic books just like him, you know, was very friendly, made learning really fun for him and engaging in seeing that representation of someone who kind of, you know, is like what we you know, consider like an uncle or an aunt like our family. It's just like, there's like a different level of respect for the kids that is across the board.

My research showed that for Black parents at the primary level, a vital aspect of support was feeling that their child would be accepted for who they are as individuals. The sentiment of fearing the opposite is likely common among all parents of school-aged children. And for Black parents in particular, concern extends or is centered beyond their child's social rejection; rather, they most fear their child being institutionally marginalized or punished. Fear was an unfortunate theme in my conversations with Black families as they described their purposes for choosing Redd. One parent offered the following example:

You worry about things like if my son has a temper tantrum, I don't want somebody to say he needs a 504 plan. If he's a disruptive to the class, we have to call the police on your son today, because he had a meltdown. That doesn't feel good. But instead, what I can do as both an active parent as well as knowing what the community is, I can say, "Hey, Mrs. Murdock my son had a meltdown on Thursday can we go make sure that he's checked in the kindergarten classroom?" Hey, let me also tap in with the principal who I've gotten to develop a relationship with, let me tap into the magnet coordinator who knows we are because they know each of the children as who they are.

This parent also shared that their fear of their children being punished or negatively labeled is alleviated by the Redd faculty and staff's ability to address individual student needs within a collective framework. She explained:

And they treat them individually and they treat them as a collective, they make sure that they all get to the same place, right. They know my kids, they don't treat them like they're a nuisance. They don't treat them like they are a problem. If...when they have the

meltdown, it's like it's like solution focused. It's not like it's making them feel like they're bad about, you know, the experience which they actually have had happened to them before. And that's not something that makes them want to go back to school either.

This second quote helps deepen our understanding of the CES attributes experienced by Black parents at Redd. Supporting Black parents means that a school works collectively toward ensuring that Black parents feel confident that their child will not be unjustly treated for being Black. The parents I spoke with recognized and deeply appreciate the work Redd does to create a culture and sense of community. One mother stated,

The principal and also the teachers just the way they embraced families to come be a part of this completely, I mean, they were actually at the beginning of the year, it wasn't a complete open-door policy, but they're like, come see what we're doing. Be involved. Call anytime and they would call.

The community the parent above speaks of is an embodiment of the “warm Blanket” metaphor that Dr. Canady spoke to at the beginning of this section. Students are not supported either socially *or* academically, Redd insists on both.

Support is holistic, far-reaching and affirms all aspects of student identity. One father I spoke with shared that one of his primary concerns when choosing an elementary school for his son was finding a space accepting of a same-sex couples and their children. He explained to me that as part of an African American same sex couple, he and his partner refused to enroll their son in a homophobic school setting. When they first toured Redd he asked an administrator, “How do you feel about a same-sex African American family?” The administrator assured him that Redd was accepting of all family compositions, and since enrolling his son their family has felt more than welcome. This is yet another example that speaks to the complexity of supporting Black students in school. It is not enough to just be conscious and inclusive on the basis of race; safe spaces for Black students must be mindful of the diversity amongst Black students and their families. It was ironic that the comment about a same sex couple was made during one of my



interviews with parents, because during an informal conversation with a teacher at Redd, we discussed the recent uptick in book bans and she balked at the idea of restricting student learning. She shared the following, “People’s families have two moms and two dads. So like, I’m like, there’s students at the school that have families that have two moms or two dads so we should learn about that.” This statement, similar to the sentiments of many comments from Redd teachers, demonstrates a level of alignment with supporting the diverse needs of their Black student population that is key for a comprehensive ecosystem of support.

### Caregivers Supporting Redd

A significant benefit of an effective ecosystem of support is that it increases the likelihood of caregivers being a consistent presence on campus. Similar to my previous findings at MHS, support begets support and because the caregivers feel supported by Redd, they provide support back in return. In each of my formal and informal conversations with Redd caregivers, they spoke about participating in a variety of different volunteer opportunities around the school. One parent shared how the school’s open policies allowed him to be a consistently supportive adult in his child’s classroom:

They have regular monthly meetings, which they invited all the parents to, so there was always an email blast, you know, come to the meetings. And they were very transparent in that respect. The school was always an open campus. So, you know, you could come to, you know, your child’s class or whatever, you know, you check in at the office. And so, it was welcoming in that respect. And I found that and, again, it was a bit more active with parents, but I found that the teachers welcome that. They welcome the interaction, and, you know, and I was able to help out in class during lunch and things like that.

This particular finding about parent-inclusive support and the culture it creates at Redd are integral to Black student success because research consistently substantiates the claim that students of all racial ethnic backgrounds perform better academically when their parents are involved in their education (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). Parental inclusion within school

spaces has been especially difficult to regain for schools since the COVID-19 pandemic, but one parent explained that Redd has been able to navigate this return to in-person learning by being adamant about increasing parent visibility and participation within the school:

So there was an influx of parent volunteers, post pandemic, I think after I think that after the pandemic, I think that the families were craving more community. The response was astounding. The amount of parent volunteers that showed up last year, were probably the highest numbers in the past like two years or probably the highest numbers that they've had on campus consistently. Like these parents have been showing up and showing out. Everybody has a role.

The parent was speaking to a larger village mentality of crafting a school space that enhances the success of all students and families. Moreover, the fact that so many parents are willing to be active participants in the school signals their level of satisfaction with the environment that has been created for their children.

### Support for Teachers

At Redd, as was documented at MHS, administration provides the same extent of supports their teachers, as they do for students and caregivers. Redd educators have autonomy over their curriculum which is both liberating and taxing. It is liberating in the sense that they are not restricted by district mandates as to what they have to teach, but taxing in that they are responsible for creating all materials. Recognizing the difficulty in this work, Redd school leaders engage in a number of practices to ensure support and alignment. At the beginning of the year Redd administration take their staff on an annual retreat where according to Dr. Canady, “We go back to who we are as a school, that connectedness to social justice.” Annual staff retreats are crucial for grounding teachers at the beginning of the year while also providing them with a space for team building and healing. Teachers who participated in my study also spoke highly of the professional development they are provided throughout the year as well as the curricular support they are given when crafting new materials.

Another paramount element of supporting teachers is providing administrative backing in conflicts with parents. While Redd is known in the Los Angeles area for its rich social-justice oriented Afro-centric curriculum, not all parents deem this educational approach appropriate. Each of the teachers I spoke with shared instances of when they were “challenged” by parents for teaching certain content to students. One teacher needed administration’s support when a parent took issue with the curriculum due to a perceived connection with her identity:

I had a challenge with a parents who didn't want their child to learn this information. One parent she was challenging the fact that we read about Malcolm X. And initially, I think, you know, she was saying, because Malcolm was Muslim and I'm Muslim, and she thought I maybe I'm trying to turn children to Muslim. But admin swiftly came in and corrected the parent and got her to apologize.

Having support from school leaders undoubtedly influences teachers’ likelihood of supporting administrators back in return. Teachers supporting school leaders is rarely discussed within educational discourse, but at Redd I found that teachers supported administrators by buying-in to systems and school wide initiatives to ensure that the leader’s vision of the school could be actualized. Support is therefore constantly reciprocal as teachers receive support and then provide support. Another teacher described an incident where a parent argued that students were learning too much “opinion-based things,” about history and students needed content that aligned with state standards. This parent went as far as issuing a complaint to the district. In response, Dr. Canady quickly came to the defense of her teacher asking her to compile all necessary data to demonstrate the students’ academic growth over time and informed the district that Redd will not be, “bowing down or curbing how we're teaching.” Again, this example of educator support creates an infectious environment of support and alignment where all stakeholders are bought in on a common goal. Moreover, several teachers shared that this level of support from the

administrators empowers them to be innovative in creating and delivering their curriculum and pedagogy.

### Support for Students

As previously stated, the most important element of effective ecosystem of support is students' perceived levels of support from the school. I observed high levels of connection between students and school staff at Redd. When students encountered different adults on campus, some sort of greeting exchanged, often times a hug, was almost always exchanged. I was on campus numerous times when students had varied behavioral mishaps, and I was astounded by the level of support and care that they received from Redd faculty and staff. As with many schools across the country, there are multiple students on campus who are regularly sent to the office for repeated issues with behavior. At Redd however, those students do not sit in the corner of the office in silence until the bell rings, rather they are provided a clipboard and are supervised while completing their academic work in one of the school leaders' offices. In my observation, students completed their work silently until they were "ready to talk." At that student-identified point, they shared their side of the situation and were normally dismissed back to class after a brief conversation. From an outsider's perspective these interactions were always more centered on care than punitive action, as administrators worked to understand what those children needed to be whole and present in their respective classrooms. I frequently walked students back to their classrooms after these interactions and would probe into how they felt; most students reported feeling calmer than when they initially entered the office.

In one third grade classroom that I observed following the lunch period, the entire class stood joining hands for what they called, "community circle." In this circle, each student shared their feelings and emotions, and provided an evaluation of their emotional state at the moment

using a one- to five-point scale. As the students divulged their experiences, I was struck by the overwhelming support they received from peers as well as their teacher, especially if they were having a difficult day. One student shared that she had a sick grandparent, which was really weighing heavily on her, and the young girl was immediately met with hugs from numerous classmates. After the community circle closed, I asked several students if that activity was important to them, and they each expressed that it was because they liked being able to share what is happening with them in their own words. I share this example because it again highlights the way Redd's CES permeates all aspects of the school building.

My interviews and informal conversations with students only furthered affirmed my conclusions about the CES at Redd because students shared the variety of ways in which they have felt supported by the adults on campus. The overall throughline in the conversations between me and all the students that I spoke with was their belief that they had an in-depth and genuine connection at least one adult on campus. When asked, "Who is a teacher on campus you feel cares about you?" one student shared the following:

Ms. Kay because she's usually the person that gives me a lot of advice. Like, even when I'm like older and past second grade because she was my second-grade teacher, because maybe because when I was there like in third and fourth grade. Then she used to give me advice for like for work or for just having friends, and like in fights and stuff; like she's the like my, she gives me a lot of advice.

This student's statement is significant because he clearly asserts that his relationship and connection to Ms. Kay existed long past their time in this teacher's classroom. Later in our focus group conversations we arrived at the topic of needing help. The exchange below between myself and the student captures the essence of how Redd is able to hold students to high standards while still providing the necessary support to reach said standards:

Jaleel: So, if I'm at your school, and I need help from a teacher. Is there a teacher you would recommend that I talked to?

Stacey: I will say the teacher that I have now. Miss King I would tell her because, because I feel like she, she can answer any questions that you have, not that other teachers can't it's just...like even if you weren't like if you aren't paying attention I think she'll still answer your question, instead of saying the fact that you aren't paying attention. She might kind of scold you and it's kind of embarrassing, but like the students actually learn from it and stuff. So, I feel like it was good, but it was also kind of embarrassing and sad at the same time but you need it.

I was surprised that the student described such an interaction as one of care because it involved being reprimanded. It is reminiscent of the “warm demander” ideology frequently taught to teachers where they encouraged to be firm with students while still exuding care (Kleinfeld, 1975). Moreover, the student’s description suggested that this interaction was similar to interactions she may have had with a parent or caregiver at home. As the conversation continued, I was somewhat surprised that another student mentioned the principal as a person to count on in difficult times,

I would probably suggest Dr. Canady because she's really nice. And she, basically, she's very calm, . And I feel like she can solve things in a orderly manner. And it's just a lot easier if you can go to her because she can get everything through and, like, handle all the important points and not like start any more drama.

This response was noteworthy because in my experience in schools, students rarely feel this level of connection to the most powerful adult on their campus—the principal. But most importantly, if students feel comfortable to approach school leaders for support in minor social altercations that occur with peers, it speaks to a larger culture that has been cultivated within Redd.

As with McCune, the CES employed at Redd requires students to support one another. Each Redd student is issued a “HEARt cards” which is core to the school’s reward-based system used to highlight certain virtues that staff would like to see exhibited and celebrated by students. Several of these virtues are about being good community members to one another, and as students demonstrate these virtues, they receive rewards such as food and/or toys.

Another proactive measure RES takes to encourage students to support one another is their Brotherhood and Sisterhood programs. The purpose of these groups is to increase students' empathy and connection to others at their school. These programs exist across grade levels, are led by parents or community members (some of whom do not have children at the school and are not compensated) and are comprised of students chosen by teachers who tend to have difficulty connecting to others. The goal of these groups is for students to see their peers as brothers and sisters that they should support rather than chastise, isolate, or tear down. Additionally, this program provides a structured space of social inclusions for some students who struggle to socially integrate with peers during brunch or lunch.

The CES created and administered at Redd vastly differs from that of MHS, but its aims are strikingly similar. Both schools go about supporting all stakeholders in different ways with the overarching goal to ensure that all stakeholders feel supported and in turn provide support other stakeholders. This supportive approach to schooling creates healthier academic environments where all stakeholders rely on contributions from each other to foster school spaces where students can reach their full potential.

## **Conclusion**

The comprehensive ecosystem of support that I observed at McCune and Redd are vital components of ensuring the educational success and wellness of Black students. Urban schools are often characterized as low-resource environments with high staff turnover that often fail to meet the needs of teachers, caregivers, and students (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006). The two sites in this study provide an instructive counter-narrative on urban schools by demonstrating how schools can cultivate environments of support that mitigate resource gaps through ensuring that all stakeholders needs are tended to. The

multistakeholder design of this research highlights that individuals who receive adequate support tend to develop more favorable perceptions of institutions. Consequently, they are more inclined to engage with and endorse institutional strategies w Schools are ecosystems that thrive when every individual within them is operating at their best.



## CHAPTER VII

### **Construct # 3: Justice-Centered School Culture**

#### **Introduction**

Policy plays a crucial role in mitigating inequity in education, but a wealth of data suggests that policy alone cannot address generational patterns of marginalization (Liu, 2024; Payne, 2008). Educational policies do not exist in a vacuum; the individuals who work in schools and the environments they cultivate significantly impact the efficacy of any policy. Practically speaking, while enforcing policies to support ELL students is essential, if school personnel view ELL students as deficient and create environments that alienate non-native speakers, these policies will have little to no impact. A school's values, norms, traditions, and daily operations—all of which comprise school culture—have a tremendous impact on students' experiences.

Scholars such as Chris Argyris (Argyris, 1960, 2010) and Edgar Schein (Schein, 1983, 1990) have emphasized the importance of examining organizational culture to gain insight into the evolution, daily practices, and overall performance of an organization. Schein (1983) defines organizational culture as “a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solves problems of external adaptation and internal integration” (p.1 ). By studying organizational culture, we can better understand why organizations function as they do, how they adapt to challenges, and how internal norms shape behavior. Though organizational theory is traditionally rooted in social science fields like economics, it has been applied in education to explore why schools operate in particular ways. Deal and Peterson (2002) explain school culture as encompassing the rituals, traditions, values, beliefs, and assumptions that shape the environment and experiences within a school. It is widely recognized that a strong, positive school culture

enhances student achievement and increases job satisfaction among educators (Erickson, 1987; Lee & Louis, 2019; Martin, 2009).

At McCune and Redd, I discovered school cultures grounded in justice that helped alleviate hardships for Black students. I use the term justice because a core aspect of the culture within both schools is the commitment to doing what is right for all students. Justice, a concept originally rooted in the legal field, is generally understood as ensuring individuals receive equal treatment under the law. Philosopher Nancy Fraser (Fraser, 2009) has expanded traditional conceptions of justice to include economic and identity dimensions. According to Fraser, economic justice involves the redistribution of resources under the principle of equity, while identity justice entails the cultural recognition of non-dominant groups within society. In the context of education, Howard (2024) redefines justice as “recognizing each person’s humanity and providing the basic necessities that allow each person to be seen, heard, valued, and recognized” (p.13). Howard argues that justice should not remain an abstract ideal but must instead actively inform our daily practices with students.

Inspired by these influential works, I define justice-centered school culture as schools that consciously recognize that students of non-dominant backgrounds experience schools in various ways, and therefore base their values, norms, and daily practices around disrupting schooling inequities for marginalized student groups. Recognizing differential experiences of marginalized student groups means that educators explicitly reckon with the historical and contemporary oppressions that certain student groups encounter in K-12 school spaces. In justice-centered schools, educators take on active roles in disrupting patterns of oppression for marginalized student groups. Justice-centered school culture is not grounded in fairness, but instead rectifying historical and contemporary injustice. Centuries ago, Greek philosopher

Aristotle operationalized justice as a concept where, “equals should be treated equally and unequals unequally,” (Aristotle, 1998), meaning that all people should be treated the same unless there are relevant differences that impact the particular situation they are in. In schools, students who are not White and middle class are often rendered unequal (Howard, 2024; Leonardo, 2012; Milner, 2023), hence they require unequal treatment. Justice-centered school culture aims to create a more nuanced and compassionate approach to schooling that considers the varied and complex ways in which certain students experience and are affected by schooling inequality. During my research at Redd and McCune, I identified two critical components of developing a justice-centered school culture: high expectations for all stakeholders and contextually grounded praxis and engagement. Further elaboration on both concepts is provided in the succeeding chapters.

## **High-Expectations**

### *Students at McCune*

High expectations are foundational to the development of justice-centered schools for Black students because research consistently shows that one of the main contributors to the academic peril of Black students is the deficit-based beliefs and low expectations of their educators (Delpit, 2012; Gershenson et al., 2016). Developing justice-centered environments for Black students requires a disruption of deficit-based beliefs about Black students and their families. During my first day of observation at McCune the principal repeatedly used the phrase, “This is a professional learning environment.” As he gave me a tour around the campus, one of the first stops we made was the “Grad Wall.” which displays the names of recent graduates of McCune and the four-year universities they attended upon graduation. According to Mr. Smart. the wall was a demonstration of academic excellence, as it displayed names of McCune

graduates who subsequently matriculated to some of the top ranked higher education institutions in this country, including Yale, UCLA, and Spelman College. In the center of this display, a small sign reads, “Class of 20\_\_\_\_ did it, so can you.” The Grad Wall is symbolic of a deep cultural belief at McCune that all students can gain admission to college. Or put simply by several of the students and staff I spoke to, “McCune goes to college.” There are likely hundreds, if not thousands of secondary schools across the country that display college pennants in their hallways and classrooms but many of those schools do not always support students with practices and policies that result in them gaining access to college. It was clear in my time at McCune that essentially every adult expects all students to graduate from the school while academically eligible for college.

During my data collection at McCune, I discovered that instilling high expectations required the development and enforcement of intentional practices and policies. McCune’s staff engrained high expectations for students through many of their school policies. As I stated, justice-centered school culture seeks to disrupt patterns of inequity that inordinately impact marginalized groups and though MHS educators openly engage in a number of practices to support Black students explicitly, there are often limitations in how overtly they can develop policies for one demographic of students. Therefore, MHS educators apply numerous policies and practices that would fall under the guise of what John Powell refers to as “targeted universalism”. Targeted universalism is the development of policies that are intended to specifically target one group but are applied broadly to prevent accusation of bias (Powell, 2008). The administration at MHS is clear that their primary goal is getting all students access to higher education, but they develop policies specially intended to ensure Black students are held to high expectations. For example, all students at MHS are required to complete A-G

requirements in order to graduate, rather than merely meeting the high school graduation requirements of the broader district. The additional year of math and science demanded in the A-G standards increases students' likelihood of gaining admission into the nation's top colleges. This school policy undoubtably supports all students at MHS, but one of the school counselors explained that these policies were specifically created to support Black students because research consistently shows that many college-eligible Black students are often unable to get into competitive secondary institutions not because of low-GPA's but due to insufficient course rigor. Additionally, McCune requires students to take at least one Advanced Placement or Honors course during their time at the school to improve the course rigor conveyed on student transcripts and expose them to more challenging courses that are similar to those they will encounter in college. To help students fulfill these lofty expectations, McCune has a policy in place that ensures a myriad of AP and Honors courses are offered, and that all students have access to these courses.

In my conversations with students, before we began to discuss any interpersonal interactions with staff, they made it clear that they are acutely aware of the high expectations set by the staff at McCune. When asked what makes McCune different from other schools, eleventh grader Zacharia explained the following:

It's basically like, they set the expectations to push everybody, they believe in everybody, even if they're failing students, they push everybody to achieve more... They put zero tolerance policies in they put in stuff where you can't just take all Common Core classes, or at least that's what I've heard from so they make them they try to get in those courses. They also push their students to at least achieved for like at least one AP if you're within all four years, at least to some honors classes. Just have something.

A rising senior who participated in this study echoed these sentiments when answering the same question:

I think they push you and the community I don't know, I felt like they give you the opportunities and put you in these places. I think, I think that's what makes it different, is because like all opportunities, I said like opportunities that they give you like they do have a lot of AP classes and things like that. Like they have extracurriculars will have some but they have clubs like they have a lot of them.

It is imperative to highlight that both students used the word, “push” because it is vastly different than the way push is normatively used for Black students in school. The term push is often used in educational literature to describe how Black students are pushed out or pushed to the margins in school settings and the larger K-12 educational system. In contrast, these MHS students describe being pushed toward achievement. The high expectations set forth for students at McCune do not just exist on paper but are explicitly and consistently communicated to the students. From my different discussions with them, it was apparent that students seemingly understood from the time they enter McCune that the overall, two-part expectation is for them to take on rigorous courses, and then attend a four-year university immediately upon graduation. A central component of high expectations for students is providing access to the types of classes that would contribute to their success beyond high school such as AP and honors courses. MHS ensures that all students have access to high-quality courses by hiring staff qualified to teach higher-level courses and actively removing barriers, such as unsupportive counselors and teachers, that might discourage students. Instead, the justice-centered school culture at MHS encourages students to pursue rigorous coursework, providing the guidance and support necessary for their success.

### *Teachers at McCune*

Another way that justice-centered school culture was enacted at McCune was through the hiring of highly qualified teachers. Research shows that Black students are amongst those most likely to have novice teachers in K-12 schools (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Gershenson, 2015). Justice-Centered schools ensure that Black students have highly qualified and capable educators

because it has a tremendous impact on students' experience in those classrooms. The school leaders and personnel at McCune explained to me that there are a plethora of teachers eager to work at McCune, so they are able to be highly selective in their staffing. Mr. Smart, the school's principal, informed me that one of his top priorities when hiring teachers is ensuring that they believe in students' ability and hold them to high academic expectations. He explained his priorities further:

One thing that they [teachers I hire] do have in common first is have high standards. I'm looking for somebody that is not going to dumb it down; somebody's going to hold our kids accountable because accountability is crucial. Right then if that kid falls down, which they typically are, [because] things are going to happen [and] I'm ready to pick them up. Are you gonna provide them some supports to help achieve these rigorous standards that you've already set? Right? And so those areas for me are crucial.

To reiterate my previous point, I interpret this quote by Mr. Smart to mean that he will not hire people he does not believe in, and subsequently who do not believe in the students at McCune. Unfortunately, many school leaders continue to let people whom they do not consider "good teachers," lead classrooms without intervention due to low expectations of these teachers.

One morning while observing in a 10<sup>th</sup> grade science class at McCune, a teacher walked in and struck up a side conversation with the classrooms teacher. As their conversation continued, I noticed both teachers looking in my direction and the visiting teacher began to approach me. He introduced himself as Mr. Tran, a ninth-grade mathematics teacher, and he wanted to know what I was taking notes about. I explained the purpose of my project and he seemingly wanted to provide a counter-narrative of McCune based on his own experiences. Mr. Tran explained that this was his first year at McCune, but he was planning on leaving at the end of the year because he did not think school administration treated teachers fairly. I asked him if he could recount any specific incidents that caused him to be disgruntled. He explained that he had been written up numerous times for being minutes late to school. According to him, the most

egregious incident he experienced occurred when he asked to leave a weekly professional development session early for a dentist appointment and his request was denied, though several other teachers were excused from that same meeting. From Mr. Tran's perspective, Mr. Smart had his favorites and at times treated other teachers unjustly.

I later asked Mr. Smart about the incidents that Mr. Tran described, and he explained that first-year teachers are not afforded the same privileges as veteran teachers and that was why Mr. Tran could not miss professional development. Mr. Smart believes that professional development is a critical time for first-year teachers to hone their skills and therefore insists on their attendance. In regard to Mr. Tran's timeliness, Mr. Smart explained that if students are expected to be on time, then educators must be held to the same standards. I include this experience because it reveals that not everybody is in support of the school culture at McCune. Justice-centered schools are not perfect schools; therefore some individuals will inevitably voice displeasure. Nevertheless, this scenario demonstrates the consistent and firm approach that leaders must take to develop justice-centered schools. The teachers I spoke with were clear that working at MHS can be difficult because, as one teacher said, "It ain't just the students who are held to high expectations." It is important to note that this teacher was also clear that the school's support of educators is unique as well.

In my observation at McCune, I did not enter a single classroom where meaningful academic work was not taking place. Far too often in high-need urban schools, students are subjected to low-skilled teachers who issue low-skill assignments that hamper students' academic development and curiosity (Ladson-Billings, 2017; Muhammad, 2020). McCune's school leaders hold teachers to high expectations to ensure that classrooms are not filled with students merely completing busy work. During my observation, I saw no students sitting



passively in class for an extended period of time not doing work. Students were constantly monitored and assisted by their teachers to complete their work. Whenever I observed classrooms with Mr. Smart, he did not “warn” teachers that he would be coming to their classroom with a guest conducting research. We would simply knock on classroom doors, quietly enter, and take a seat in the back. The classroom observations struck me as odd because LAUSD mandates require a minimum “24 hours heads up” before any administrative observation, but Mr. Smart explained that they have been able to cultivate a culture within McCune where educators are welcoming of additional classroom support. More poignantly as Mr. Smart rhetorically stated, “What do you have to hide?” This approach exemplifies the justice-centered culture within McCune that insists upon all teachers engaging in high-quality instruction at all times. Teachers receive two formal observations each school year, but welcome administration’s presence throughout the year to provide any feedback or support. The scheduled and unscheduled observations once again demonstrate that teachers at McCune were being held to high expectations, and teachers in turn had high expectations of their administrators to provide support without punitive action.

#### *Caregivers at McCune*

Finally, high expectations must extend to caregivers as well. As previously detailed, McCune expects and encourages high levels of engagement and participation from caregivers in their student’s education. In the same way that Black students are subjected to low expectations and deficit-based ideals in K-12 education or across the United States, so too are many Black parents and caregivers (Barton et al., 2004; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). At McCune, by contrast, Black parents are welcomed through a variety of avenues. One parent told me about the benefits of their Parent Resource Center (PRC) which is open during school hours and where

parents are given access to a variety of resources, such as computers. The PRC also encourages parental presence at the school. Additionally, McCune holds parent teacher conferences twice a year, monthly coffee meetings with the principal, regular PTA meetings, as well grade-level parent meetings four times a year. Several educators spoke highly of the caregivers at McCune and pointed to caregiver participation as being one of their favorite features of working at the school. McCune is a shining example of how high expectations cannot just center on students but must also extend to all stakeholders in order to create justice-centered school culture.

### **Contextually Grounded Praxis and Engagement at McCune High School**

Schools' policies, culture, and curricula often default to middle-class White cultural norms (Diamond & Gomez, 2023; Leonardo, 2012). Therefore, meeting the needs of non-dominant student groups requires adapting normative school practices and striving to provide contextually grounded services. Contextually grounded engagement and praxis means that educators adapt schooling in a manner that favorably incorporates the backgrounds and identities of students and their families. I intentionally use the phrase praxis instead of practice, because practice is about daily action; while praxis is action that is informed by reflection, with the goal of meaningful social change (Freire, 2017). While 'contextually grounded engagement and praxis' represents a singular concept in this research, it encompasses two distinct yet overlapping elements—engagement and praxis—which, when enacted in concert, create the greatest potential for meaningful and sustained impact. For educators to provide contextually grounded engagement and praxis, they must consider and constantly reflect upon a multitude of factors amongst their student body population such as, but not limited to, race, socioeconomic status, community history, etc.

Justice-centered school culture is unattainable without contextually grounded praxis and engagement because contextual consciousness enhances the sense of belonging and inclusion for historically marginalized groups. McCune is a professional environment of learning; it is also a high school located in a community with a rich history of perseverance and pain. While McCune prides itself on its ability to provide students with pathways to college, school personnel are also aware of why this pathway is critical for the students and families of this particular community. McCune's educators do not push students toward college for the sake of improving their institution's reputation, but because they believe in the power of higher education to transform lives and communities. Many of the staff members at McCune are from the community and regularly share stories with students about how education has been transformative in their lives. McCune as a staff does not believe in providing a context-neutral push for college, but rather one that is grounded in an understanding of students, their communities, and their families. Mr. Smart explained his reasoning for the push in the following way:

There's just more out there. So, make sure you keep your doors open with your grades. So while you're exploring what those options are, when one of those things that may interest you comes about, be sure that you're ready to jump on that option. Right? So, it will teach them that it's okay for you not to know what you want to do with yourself when you are 14, 15, 16, 17 years old. I always give them example, if you had told me I was gonna be a principal, I would have told you you're crazy. Yeah. Right. And so, but I kept my options open, because my grades were good, right? So, trying to change that narrative of this is just what I'm destined to do.

Mr. Smart made it clear in our discussions that he does not push college simply for the sake of getting students to college, but that the school stresses higher education because he wants students to attain and envision more for themselves and their futures than what they currently see.

My conversations with Mr. Smart made it clear that he is acutely aware of the context in which he educates young people, and that he is mindful of the ways in which he communicates

and conveys his messaging. He knows that students within this community encounter a host of difficulties outside of school that impact how they show up and interact within the school environment. Mr. Smart is conscious of the ways he interacts with students and explained his style:

Addressing them in a way that you're coming in late to school I'm not going...well I'm a hood principal, I'm not going to bang on you for coming to school late. I'm gonna say, "Good morning. How are you doing?" Say you're doing a good job and then find out maybe why you're late. Maybe some suggestions on how to do it right but not come at you in a way where it feels like where I feel you feel like I'm the police. So basically, caring for them. Right and not strong arming them.

Mr. Smart explains that he does not want students or their families to feel like he is the police, demonstrating an awareness of the ways in which K-12 schools have historically been viewed by students: acting as an extension of the state for surveillance and control of Black families, particularly those in poor communities (Jenkins & Warren, 2024). Mr. Smart noted that he takes that history into account when interacting with students and comes from a place of support.

It was apparent in observing him that contextually grounded engagement extends to all members of the school community, including parents. During one of my observations a parent came into the office irate about a matter pertaining to her child and demanding to speak with Mr. Smart. When Mr. Smart exited his office and saw the parent, she immediately began yelling at him. He made no attempts to silence her or cut her off. After she finished what she was saying, he calmly replied to her and pointed her in the direction of a staff person who could assist her with her issues; afterwards he returned to his office and continued business as usual. I asked Mr. Smart about this interaction and how he remained so poised. He replied, "Because I understand where parents are coming from. Most the times they not mad at me, they mad at their circumstance." This brief, instructive moment emphasized the importance of educators being conscious of community context and ways of being. The aforementioned incident is the

embodiment of contextually grounded engagement because Mr. Smart demonstrated an awareness of: a) structural conditions shaping the realities of Black folks in particular; b) Black parents expressing their love for their children in ways that are dissimilar from dominant culture; and c) other state institutional actors often responding to Black parents in punitive ways with disastrous consequences. Mr. Smart's and the rest of McCune staff's awareness of the context in which they educate children and how their interactions and responses impact all stakeholders are key for developing a justice-centered school culture.

### *The Value of Community Partnerships*

With the paucity of academic and fiscal resources in many urban schools and communities, collaboration with community-based organizations plays a vital role in ameliorating vulnerability. Therefore, another vital component of contextually grounded engagement is actively working to close resource gaps. Whenever observing at McCune, my routine was to check in at Mr. Smart's office, and he would let me know when and where I would be assigned that day. Nearly every time that I checked in with him, a representative from some community-based organization would be in his office discussing potential collaboration with the school and the larger community aimed at mitigating resource gaps in McCune students' lives. For example, one morning in late September, Mr. Smart was speaking with a representative from an organization called Bridge Builders Foundation in his office. Bridge Builders Foundation is a non-profit organization that partners with high schools to provide students with employment opportunities, mentoring, and scholarships. Students must be recommended to the program and once accepted, work as paid tutors on the weekends for a local elementary school. The representative from Bridge Builders program shared that they have difficulty finding schools willing to work with them. Mr. Smart found them because he was

looking for more opportunities for students to earn money and spend their time doing something constructive. When I asked Mr. Smart why this mattered so much he stated, “I know what else is out there.”

Another afternoon several weeks later, I arrived on campus and Mr. Smart was meeting with a representative of the local Boys and Girls Club in attempts to navigate the afterschool bussing schedule for students. The Boys and Girls Club offers students cooking courses, driver education, and a plethora of other activities after school that Mr. Smart believes are crucial for students to experience. He again reiterated the importance of ensuring students have access to constructive activities outside of school hours. Mr. Smart informed me that he is constantly searching for more opportunities to partner with organizations that can bring additional resources and supports to the school because he firmly believes, “You cannot do this work alone.” Mr. Smart also spoke passionately about being a member of the community and witnessing too many instances in which young people fell victims to the ills of idle time. Understanding the realities of the community surrounding McCune and being a parent himself, he expressed how he consistently tries his best to ensure that his students are inundated with positive opportunities to grow and explore a variety of different fields.

Mr. Smart also leverages relationships to support students by hosting an annual career fair. Each year he invites more than 25 professionals in the greater Los Angeles area (most of whom are Black) to speak to students about their occupations and the paths they traversed to enter or become established in their current fields. Many secondary schools no longer host events like a career day, but Mr. Smart finds this exercise especially beneficial for his students because he recognizes that many of them do not have access to professionals such as those he invites in their personal lives. Mr. Smart’s acute recognition of the context in which he serves allows him

to provide students with supports and resources that meet their needs rather than blanketed policies and initiatives that may or may not close opportunity gaps.

### *Context Conscious Instruction*

In the same way that administrators at McCune operate from a context-conscious paradigm, so do its teachers. Many of the teachers described their work at McCune as “personal,” because they come from the community where they teach and want to ensure the next generation is equipped with the necessary tools to succeed. For example, I once observed Ms. Espinoza’s eleventh grade Ethnic Studies class where students were discussing activist strategies utilized during the Civil Rights Movement. Students were given an assignment to write a one-page paper about a Civil Rights leader, and to argue about why that particular leader’s perspective was most important for achieving the movement’s goal. As students began to work individually, I spoke with Ms. Espinoza about the assignment. She explained that she is a McCune alum, but she was a “late bloomer” who failed to take advantage of the opportunities provided to her during her time in high school. She recounted that her experiences motivate the work she does with students today and she strives to make her classroom engaging and applicable to students’ lives, so they do not feel like school is a “waste of time” like she did. During this Civil Rights Movement lesson, after students completed reading their one pager, the class engaged in a Socratic discussion during which she challenged them to verbally assess the extent to which the Movement accomplished its intended goals it. The conversation became localized as students described ways in which they witnessed lingering effects of some of the Movement’s failed policy within their own lives.

Contextually grounded school curriculum is crucial for justice-centered school culture because it demonstrates to Black students that the knowledge, they bring to the classroom is

highly valued. I found the incorporation of cultural referents in classroom instruction most prevalent in the English Language Arts classrooms I observed, as teachers constantly pushed students to make connections between their own lives and the literature they read. In one classroom discussion I sat in on, students were analyzing *Lord of the Flies* and the teacher framed the discussion around the idea of fear versus hope. As students discussed how they saw this dichotomy present in the novel, the teacher pushed them to think about how that dichotomy shows up in their own lives. This example shows that even when using district-mandated curriculum, justice-centered teachers find ways to connect canonical texts to students' lived experiences.

## **High Expectations**

### *Students at Redd*

During an informal conversation with school leaders at Redd, we engaged in a fruitful discussion about why outcomes for Black students are so abysmal across the district. In stark alignment, each of the administrators explained how negative perceptions that school personnel have of Black children show up in any and all ways within the school environment. Consequently, it can be argued that the primary reason Redd has become the stellar institution that it is, is due to a staff-wide shared belief that Black children can achieve at the same level academically as their peers when provided the appropriate learning opportunities. The following interview excerpt with Dr. Canady exemplifies much of the staff's beliefs concerning Black children:

Jaleel: If you had to tell someone, one of the most important things that both Black and non-Black educators need to understand when educating Black students what would it be?

Dr. Canady: So many ways to answer. The first thing. First thing that comes to mind, though, is just completely eradicating, any thoughts you have around deficit, and then



being defiant, like just take all of that thinking away as probably the top two, because it's lack of expectations for our babies academically. Oh, they can't do this. Oh lazy, oh there's not enough support at home, they can't read oh...like all of that just thwarts progress, and then you've got the, they want to talk back, or they don't want to listen. If we get rid of those top two things, there could be a whole lot more progress made with Black children.

Dr. Canady's framing is critical because she does not place the fault for subpar academic outcomes on Black students or families, but rather asserts that the academic struggles of Black students result from educators who do not see or expect the best out of them. The high expectations school personnel have for Black students, not found in many schools, is one reason many parents noted for enrolling their children at Redd. For example, a parent shared, "And then as these teachers you know, they love on them, they give these you know, they set high expectations." At Redd, Black students are viewed as capable and pushed accordingly to reach their highest potential. It was evident that Black students are seen as an asset and not a problem at Redd. Unlike many other schools, school leaders at Redd believe that educators who fail to recognize the brilliance of Black children are the ones who are and should be "encouraged" to find another place of employment.

#### *High Expectations for Teachers at Redd*

Educators who do not hold Black students to high standards often operate from biased perceptions, which is why teachers at Redd are encouraged to critically examine and challenge their assumptions about Black children. This perspective of educating Black children is why school leaders constantly urge teachers to "explore their stuff."

So, I think it's important for like educators to really explore their own individual biases, and Black educators too, because just because we're Black doesn't mean that we don't have biases against Black children. Black children are from certain backgrounds or Black children that present themselves in certain ways.

A second-grade teacher at Redd shared a similar viewpoint:

It's very important for you to understand your positionality, if you don't understand who you are, and what biases you bring to the table, then you're automatically going to go on to put those biases on Black students in particular because that's what our society has done. So, you have to examine your own biases first, because otherwise you will, without a doubt, push those biases and stereotypes on our babies, because it's been it's done widely, and it's done subconsciously.

These statements clarify that setting high expectations for Black students begins with high expectations of school staff. At Redd teachers are expected to check their own biases and beliefs about Black children. Additionally, they are expected to provide students with rigorous content and high-quality instruction that challenges students intellectually. Teachers explained to me that it requires a great deal of work and skill to create curriculum that supports Black students, but this expectation was clearly conveyed to them before they were hired. Whenever Redd is in the process of hiring new teachers one of the primary philosophies they must convey is that more is expected of them at Redd than at most school sites, and if they are unwilling to take on this responsibility they should search elsewhere for employment. High expectations are similarly set for students and caregivers.

#### *Caregivers at Redd*

Similar to McCune, school leaders at Redd expect high levels of engagement and participation from caregivers. There is no required amount of volunteer hours that parents must complete, but there are constant communications sent out to caregivers asking for their involvement with the school and school-related activities. The campus's parent center is filled with resources and open during school hours. The three parents who participated in my focus group all spoke of volunteer opportunities they had taken on at Redd, ranging from classroom support to after-school club involvement. Additionally, the school hosts regularly scheduled and highly attended site council and PTA meetings. These findings are significant because they

reveal that Redd values the contributions of Black caregivers and therefore welcomes them into the school environment.

### *Instilling High Expectations of Self*

My research at Redd found that an integral aspect of establishing high expectations for Black students entails disrupting any deficit-based beliefs Black students may have of Blackness. The heightened level of autonomy teachers are trusted with at Redd allows educators to utilize curricula as a vehicle for providing students with an asset-based framing of Blackness. One of the 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers at Redd explained to me that the school's motto centers around, "ancestors and strength." The educators operate under this frame because they believe that students should view their identities and backgrounds as assets. School personnel reported that Black students need to feel good about themselves, particularly as their self-understanding relates to their race and culture. Numerous educators I spoke with at Redd explained that when students do not see themselves as capable, such negative internalized belief(s) of self, it leads to lower academic performance. At Redd curriculum serves a dual purpose of education and affirmation. The work students are given is challenging, but the unstated belief is that if we can instill in you a sense of self confidence, your potential is limitless. The following quote from a third-grade teacher further expands upon this belief:

And I feel like we have to start with our young ones, because if they don't believe in themselves, and they will continue to perpetuate the norms that we're trying to change, and like I said disrupt and transform our society into a place that's more tolerable we don't know when the change is going to really, you know be realized. We have to make sure that the Black children in particular understand how powerful they are, and how valuable they are and, that we need them.

There is a clear intention at Redd to make Black students feel powerful. Educators create this sense of power by providing students with curricular materials that have a positive narrative on Blackness and assignments that stimulate students' intellectual curiosity. Teachers are aware,

however, that making Black students feel good about themselves is a holistic undertaking and requires them to use content to eradicate other deficit-based beliefs about self. For instance, Ms. Green, described how she uses the biography, *Malcom X: By Any Means Necessary* by Walter Dean Myers, to unpack Black students' sense of beauty. She recounted how, during her early years instructing K-12 in other schools, she was saddened to see elementary age Black girls already wearing weaves and wigs. In the following quote, Ms. Green explains how she could see herself in many of these Black girls:

I've been through that process too. So, I'm not talking about them. I understand that thinking in that mentality. But you can look at that that child and know that you are not comfortable in your skin. You're not comfortable knowing that the way your hair grows is how God made it, that's your hair. And love it. Your skin too.

She explained that now that she teaches at Redd, she can use texts such as the Malcolm X biography to help students better understand themselves. Ms. Green shared that during "community circle" time she would often ask students questions, in particular: "Why did he put that conk in his head? What was his perception? Why did he not view himself as being good enough?" She said this brings about rich discussion and has also resulted in more Black girls wearing natural hairstyles. Though she is discussing physical appearance, the significance lies in her affirmation to Black students that they are enough, fostering a sense of self-worth and belonging that transcends societal biases. Her approach speaks again to the depth of establishing high expectations for Black children because she is attempting to instill in them a belief in all aspects of self. Black students' self-beliefs are rarely tended to in educational literature on the harms of low-expectations; my research found that for Black students particularly, you cannot separate the two. Black students need school spaces that build up their belief in self. Educators at Redd hold Black students to high expectations, but also want Black students to elevate expectations for themselves. Teachers at Redd shared that they do not believe it possible for

students to elevate expectations for themselves if they do not feel good about who they are. In the same way that students are held to high expectations academically they are also held to high expectations behaviorally.

Cultivating a justice-centered school culture for Black students in K-12 spaces must attend to the pervasive tendency in many schools toward over-disciplining of Black students. Staff at Redd are adamant that they do not believe in applying punitive actions to correct behavior because such practices inordinately harm Black children. Redd's students are held to high expectations in regard to how they conduct themselves on campus, but this is done through what one teacher described as a "healing and restorative justice approach." The conduct expectations for students at Redd are designed to affirm students in who they are and to diminish negative conceptualizations students may have of themselves. All behavioral conduct at Redd is evaluated and measured using a tool the school created called, "HEARt CARDS." Each student on Redd's campus is required to carry their HEARt card at all times and can receive positive praise or a redirection based on the virtues displayed on the card. The seven virtues of conduct are: Order, Harmony, Justice, Truth, Balance, Propriety, and Righteousness. The principal explained the purpose behind the HEARt cards and virtues in the following way:

Our whole piece is that our children have within them already what they need to make righteous decisions, so we have this whole piece just around virtuous conduct and saying all that to say, when they're not in class because, you know, there was some infraction where a teacher kicked them out, they're missing instruction which of course doesn't help with them being able to thrive in a classroom. We don't have a lot of that, of course, but you know, our children sometimes do stuff that any other school and children do. But how we address it is done differently much more holistic, nurturing, just responsive approach so that they're actually in the classroom receiving instruction, not sitting in the office for some discipline piece, it wasn't that serious anyway.

The goal for school leaders is to be able to turn all behavioral infractions into teachable moments for students and the HEARt cards are the anchor for ensuring consistent

communication around that aim. HEARt cards are based upon core values that school personnel deem important for students to practice and live beyond the walls of Redd. Students recite these virtues every morning to ensure they understand them and can apply them to the real world. Hence, when incidents occur that educators deem to be against core values, they can direct students back to their HEARt cards. For example, while I was observing a second-grade classroom, a named student named Deshaun took a pencil from another student's (Michael's) desk without permission and began to use it. Michael asked for his pencil back and when the Deshaun refused, he immediately blurted out that Deshaun had stolen from him. This disruption could have easily derailed the focus of the entire class, but the teacher simply approached Deshaun and asked, "Is that righteous behavior?" Deshaun quickly replied, "No," returned the pencil to Michael, and apologized for his behavior. I later asked the teacher if that is normally how behavior incidents go in class, and she told me it varies. Still, if students do not believe they are in the wrong, "They have to explain what they've done, and they have to use our virtues to explain it." In this way students are held accountable to their actions, while still being affirmed that they have these virtues within them.

Students are expected to demonstrate character in line with the seven virtues at all times.

One administrator explained that this process can be a shock for some students:

So, I think that those are character builders but if you're coming in from a place where you could get away with everything, or there was an assignment you didn't want to do, all you got to do is drop a pencil on the ground and get out. Well no, that's not gonna happen now. The teachers gonna walk by pick up the pencil and put it back in your hand and say, "Come on, let's go. You can do this if you need five minutes, take your five minutes. If you need some time to think. Take the time to think. But you have to work." You know, so they know that they have to accomplish. What's before them, they know everybody that's behind them pushing them forward.

The example provided above embodies the justice-centered culture that I observed at Redd, where educators consistently engage with students as if the latter are capable of accomplishing

any task placed in front of them. Students at Redd achieve at a high level because educators genuinely believe they can achieve at high levels. In the example that the administrator provided, the fact that a student at another school may be able to opt out of work can be indicative of a schooling environment where educators do not believe all students can achieve to the same standard. Educators at Redd set high expectations for students primarily because they want students to have, “a sense of value and self-worth” that educators deem more important than a good report card.

### **Contextually Grounded Engagement and Praxis at Redd Elementary School**

I believe that Redd is an informative case study of what it means for a school to be contextually grounded. The educational transformation that occurred at Redd took it from a failing school to a blue-ribbon school, and many staff directly attributed the turnaround to the school embracing the context in which it is located, and where its students and their families live.

As one teacher aptly explained:

We are a student centered, culturally responsive school in our community. And I think that our mission and vision as a social justice school as well as a culturally responsive school is what sets us apart from the typical elementary school and...you know, our neighborhood, basically. As far as supporting student achievement. The curriculum is centered around the children, who they are, what they see, we validate them, we value we affirm their culture we connect.

The Redd approach toward educating children is, in theory, relatively simple, but unfortunately a privilege too often denied to many Black students. The school’s website displays the following mission:

- Work in partnership with children, families, and community to provide a strong academic, ethical, and culturally responsive education.
- Create an environment where students’ diversity, backgrounds, and languages are highly valued.
- Build “bridges” between home and school to enable lifelong learning, problem solving, increased self-esteem, and responsible citizenship for success in a diverse, ever-changing world.

Each of these bullet points relate to cultivating a school environment that is reflective of the students who attend the school. Redd did not have this mission until 2016, and once the school embodied it, they began to see tremendous improvement in Black students' academic outcomes. There was not a single student, parent, or staff member that I spoke to during my time at Redd that did not talk about Redd being a unique space where Black students are inundated with celebrations and affirmations of Blackness. When asked what it is like for non-Black racial and ethnic groups on campus, the principal shared the following:

Our students are predominately Black, so everything is predominantly Black like that's just truth. Like I can count on one hand right, and I think we have two White kids. And if I'm honest, I don't care how they feel, because it's the complete inverse of that for us for life. I tried to make a point you know for LatinX families like yes, you don't need to feel marginalized in this predominantly Black school, but that's it.

Dr. Canady's quote exemplifies justice-centered school culture because she resisted any notions of fairness and explicitly calls for the prioritizing the needs of Black students and other non-dominant student groups. Her focus on Black students does not mean she is anti-White; she is calling attention to the fact that White students are already afforded these privileges. Justice-centered schools are able to rectify historical inequities because they are intentional in actively disrupting educational disparities that inordinately harm marginalized student groups, such as Black students. The school's embrace of the students and context they service is a primary reason that Redd Elementary has garnered its stellar reputation amongst Black families in the area. In a time of declining enrollment in public schools, and a dwindling Black population in the community surrounding Redd, the school has a wait list primarily comprised of Black students and continues to add classrooms each year.

From policy to practice, Redd ensures that students receive an education grounded in their identities and their lived experiences. The teachers I observed and interviewed were all



major proponents of project-based learning, and often utilized it to engage in meaningful learning opportunities for students about their own communities. One teacher shared the following example:

So, we did a big project one year, fourth grade. And the children went to go and find things that needed to be changed. And one of the students, he said, there are always a lot of men just hanging out in the apartments where I live, they just hang out. I said, “Well, what should they be doing?” He said, “They should be at work.” I said “okay, so then what can we develop that would help them?” And he started thinking, and he came up with an app that will alert you when there's a job. And so that app would come to your phone because that would be a way that they can have jobs. So, every time that there's a job, your app would announce it. So, you give them the tools, their little minds will create. He said he was gonna charge \$1.99. And then they always have to give back, so you know whatever it is you make then a portion of that money has to go back into the community.

Another teacher detailed an example of a project one student completed that was designed to help the unhoused population in Los Angeles:

My students would talk about seeing the homeless, so we decided to do a project and one student came up with just a business; she would write grants for, and get money from the government. And then, homeless people would be able to come in take a shower and leave. So, she structured what she would need, and they even have to build little replicas of what their business would look like. And they did an awesome job, but they took the look in their community where they live, how can I make it better.

Further, I observed a math lesson in a fourth-grade class during which students were following up on a community exploration assignment. They had walked down to a local grocery store to look at prices and were discussing to what degree prices were reasonable, and if they shopped at another community if the prices would be lower or higher. The entire purpose of the assignment was for students to begin to evaluate where they live. They then began to discuss why there are so many fast-food restaurants in this community as opposed to wealthier neighborhoods. These examples are vital because, by design, the students and their communities became synonymous with the curriculum. This particular lesson did not involve abstract concepts but was instead meant to build on what students already know and experience in their daily lives.

Context consciousness also involves an awareness of current events and the impact it has on the lives of young people. At the time of my research, a range of news stories about book bans and restricting the kind of content students learn in school were published. One afternoon while sitting in a second-grade classroom, I was surprised to observe an entire lesson dedicated to students understanding books bans and why they were occurring across the country. The lesson began with an ABC News clip about book bans. When it concluded the teacher asked students, “Should students be allowed to learn about racism?” One student promptly replied, “Kids need to learn about racism, so they don’t do it.” The conversation continued as the teacher gave more examples of books being banned on the basis of gender and sexuality; students were able to refer to an anchor chart (posted in the room) to describe the different reasons they consider book banning to be wrong. The teacher explained to me how she uses the movie *Zootopia* at the beginning of the year to introduce students to concepts such as ableism, microaggressions, and stereotypes. She then challenges students to incorporate these ideas into their work throughout the year.

Recognition of context also extends to how educators interact with students at Redd. One teacher I interviewed spoke candidly about why it is important for educators to be sensitive to students’ past experiences in school. She detailed her reasoning:

When I first got here, I had to face this group of students that have been let down, numerous times before and here I was this big presence coming into their space. I had to kind of negotiate, what my position was with them, because I respected that they were going to probably reject me because they had been rejected. So one of the first questions out of their mouths was, “You gonna leave us too?” Because everybody else that came here left them, I promised them from that day on, that if I had any control over that I was not going to abandon them, because they were valuable in the sense that they should not be looking at it from being left alone, or, or abandoned, that they had value just being there, and I wanted to enhance that value.

The high rate of teacher turnover in urban schools inevitably impacts students' perceptions of educators and becomes a barrier to learning. Ignoring the previous events in students' academic lives only serves to further the strain the connection between students and their educators. Embracing the contexts and histories of students' educational experiences is key for enhancing their success.

## **Conclusion**

Public education has existed in the United States long enough for us to identify student populations that have adverse experiences in school. Justice-centered school culture aims to create a more nuanced and equitable approach to schooling that considers the varied and complex ways in which marginalized student groups experience and are affected by inequality. There are a host of ways to ensure that Black students experience schooling in a justice-centered fashion, and the examples provided by McCune and Redd are meant to highlight how persistent obstacles that subvert the potential of Black students in school can be disrupted. Justice-centered school culture is not about ensuring fairness amongst all student groups, because it is cultivated based on a recognition that schooling in the United States has never been fair. My findings illustrate that justice-centered school culture is designed to rectify historical injustice and inequity that befalls non-dominant student groups, ensuring that marginalized students are afforded the same privileges provided to majority/dominant student groups.

## **CHAPTER VIII**

### **Discussion & Implications**

#### **Review of Study**

This dissertation investigated in-school factors that support the academic achievement of Black students. Black students are centered in this research due to the historical and ongoing challenges they have faced in K-12 public education in the United States. While a substantial body of research documents the myriad ways in which schools perpetuate harm against Black students (Annamma et al., 2019; Dumas, 2016, 2018; Jenkins & Warren, 2024), there is comparatively less empirical evidence on approaches that can be employed in schools to disrupt disparate learning outcomes for Black students.

The two sites in this study, McCune High School and Redd Elementary School, were selected because quantitative metrics indicated that Black students at these sites performed better academically than Black students at other sites in the school district. Furthermore, anecdotal accounts from Black community members and data from district-wide student surveys and informal conversations with Black parents and community members indicated that Black students' experiences at these sites were markedly different compared to other schools in the region. Both sites are traditional public schools located in urban communities, servicing a high-need predominately Black and LatinX student population. Given that Black students across the nation are disproportionately enrolled in urban majority-BIPOC schools (Orfield, 2020; Orfield & Jarvie, 2020), the context of the schools in this study offered a valuable opportunity to examine how similarly situated K-12 institutions in other locales can adopt and adapt policies and practices to support Black student wellness and academic achievement.

One distinctive feature of this research design is the inclusion of a diverse group of stakeholders, each with varying degrees of influence over the education of Black students at these two sites. The stakeholders identified in this study were Black students, Black caregivers, teachers, school leaders, and education researchers. Traditional research on school efficacy usually centers the perspectives of educators, given their domain-specific knowledge of the daily practices within schools. In recent years, a notable increase in educational research that incorporates the perspectives of students and caregivers has emerged (Bottiani et al., 2016; Howard, 2001; McKenna, 2013; So & Brush, 2008). There remains, however, a scarcity of studies that bring together these various stakeholders to provide a comprehensive understanding of what works and what does not within school environments. A unique methodological feature of my research was to examine the perspectives of this diverse group of stakeholders. The inclusion of educational scholars in this study was especially significant, as they served as expert reviewers, offering essential validation and critical feedback on the emerging grounded theory. In their current roles, these scholars frequently provide research, scholarship, and recommendations aimed at improving Black student achievement, so including them allowed for an evaluation of whether their proposed strategies are actually being implemented in K-12 schools where Black students are succeeding. Further, inclusion of these scholars in my research provided expert perspectives that substantiated the validity of my grounded theory. Their involvement functioned as an essential evaluative layer, ensuring that the theory was both credible and reflective of expert insights.

This study had two primary aims: (1) to develop a grounded theory on what makes schools effective for Black students, and (2) to explore the complexities surrounding Black student success in K-12 education, including the extent to which different stakeholders align and

diverge in their conceptions of Black student success. I made the methodological choice to include all these stakeholders because I began this study with the hypothesis that some level of “alignment” or at least shared understanding amongst key actors—students, teachers, administrators, and caregivers—contributes to and is an outcome of an effective school for Black students. To achieve these objectives, I conducted an in-depth qualitative investigation into how these school sites consistently produce exceptional outcomes for Black students.

I conducted focus group interviews with key stakeholders—including administrators, teachers, Black caregivers, Black students, and educational researcher—at each site, one-on-one interviews with key actors, and more than 50 hours of observations at both sites. Site observations were crucial for this study, as they allowed me to observe the daily interactions among Black students, Black parents, and educators within their natural environment (Baker, 2006). A first-hand perspective of classroom dynamics and communal spaces was essential for developing an in-depth understanding of how Black students experienced each site. By “experienced,” I mean what Black students saw and heard on a daily basis—how they navigated their interactions with teachers, what their engagement with lessons and classroom content looked like, how disciplinary infractions were managed, and how they were treated compared to their peers. Assessing their experience also included observing how much support and encouragement they received, and whether their cultural identities were affirmed or ignored. Understanding these dimensions helped me gain a fuller picture of the nuanced ways Black students navigated the school environment, allowing me to assess whether these spaces were genuinely supportive or stifling to their success.

Focus group interviews were equally critical to this study, as they provided a rich contextual backdrop for interpreting my observations and offered insights into the key drivers of

Black student success that could not be directly observed. These discussions allowed participants to share their perspectives on what factors contributed to Black student achievement, including aspects of school culture, teacher-student relationships, and the specific supports in place that were integral to the success of Black students. Additionally, the focus group interviews enabled participant interaction, thereby enriching the discussion and offering a more complex understanding of the phenomena under investigation (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). I also conducted semi-structured one-on-one interviews with numerous actors at both sites who were unable to participate in focus groups.

The intent behind this innovative multi-stakeholder research design was to challenge traditional approaches to studying highly effective schools. Focusing solely on the contributions of educators ignores the integral roles that other key actors, such as students, caregivers, and community members, play in student success. This is particularly important when studying Black students, as omitting the perspectives of Black students and their caregivers reinforces White supremacist ideals of who is considered to bring valued knowledge into school spaces. Moreover, educational research has contributed to the marginalization of Black voices by frequently excluding the experiences and insights of Black individuals from dominant narratives. This omission of Black stakeholders' perspectives has perpetuated biased understandings of Black students and restricted the scope of educational scholarship intended to support Black student achievement. By including these voices, this study disrupts those harmful norms and highlights collective responsibility in creating environments that support Black student success. A multi-stakeholder research approach facilitated a more robust understanding of what contributes to Black students' success at these schools while underscoring the intricate and varied ways in which educational environments serving Black students can foster and sustain

positive outcomes. Moreover, engaging with varied perspectives often that is omitted from educational research allowed for a more expansive understanding of Black student success beyond grade point averages and test scores.

## **Research Questions**

In the following section, I return to the research questions that shaped this study, providing a detailed discussion of their significance and interconnectedness. First, I revisit both questions to examine the underlying assumptions that informed their development. Then, I delve into the nuanced relationship between these questions, illustrating how each question contributes to a cohesive exploration of school effectiveness for Black students. Through this analysis, I demonstrate how these questions collectively underpin the emergence of a grounded theory, which seeks to illuminate the unique dynamics and elements that contribute to effective schooling practices for Black students. Two interrelated research questions guided this qualitative exploration:

**Q1.** How do different “stakeholders” of schools “deemed” successful for Black students conceive of success for Black students?

**Q2:** What are some of the essential characteristics, practices, and policies that are most present in schools that effectively educate Black students?

I consider these research questions interrelated because I believe that stakeholders’ beliefs and ideals about Black student success shape the practices and policies that schools put in place to achieve that success. RQ1 explores various stakeholders’ perspectives of Black student success; my research found that their collective and individual conceptions of student success directly and indirectly influence the schools’ policies, practices, and characteristics. The most salient finding relative to RQ1 was that school-based conceptions of student success must be in alignment with Black students’ and caregivers’ perceptions of student success. By this I mean that if certain stakeholders (e.g., caregivers) believe that academic mastery is the sole measure of



student success, then school personnel should aim to construct school environments that are hyper-focused on academic performance. If other stakeholders harbor broader perspectives of student success that encompass components such as identity and mental wellness, then school personnel should construct holistically nurturing school environments for student growth. My research found that when alignment amongst stakeholders occurs, there is greater buy-in to the institution and its practices.

Research consistently demonstrates that students' academic performance is greatly influenced by the perspectives that their parents and educators have of the school environment (Howard et al, 2020). I discovered that when the educators vision of student success and the approaches toward achieving that success align with the beliefs of students and caregivers, a sense of collective ownership and responsibility for the school environment emerges. This shared sense of ownership and responsibility creates a reciprocal commitment, wherein the school personnel also feel accountable for supporting the goals and achievements of its students and the broader community. This alignment drives all stakeholders toward a shared commitment of achieving common goals. The effectiveness of the policies and practices identified in RQ2 depends heavily on alignment in how stakeholders identified in RQ1 understand and define success.

RQ2 sought to identify the specific characteristics, practices, and policies present in schools that effectively educate Black students. These characteristics and practices are the tangible expressions of how those schools and their stakeholders conceive of success.

In my data analysis, I found evidence that suggested the characteristics and practices identified in RQ2 reflect the stakeholder conceptions of success explored in RQ1. For instance, caregivers placed great emphasis on mental health and social-emotional wellness as core components of

student success. Consequently, both sites had a myriad of mental health supports available to students that are intended to support students' well-being and overall developmental needs, ensuring they have the support necessary to thrive academically and personally. Therefore, a dynamic relationship was evident: stakeholders' conceptions as revealed in answering RQ1 inform the effectiveness of the policies and practices being investigated by RQ2. In other words, RQ1 served to capture the foundation of this study, as it explored the various perspectives of what success means for Black students. Subsequently, RQ2 explored the concrete characteristics and strategies that arise from those interpretations.

Together, these questions and the subsequent responses to them contribute to the development of a grounded theory on effective schools for Black students that is both practical for K-12 schools and can serve as an analytical tool for evaluating school environments for marginalized student groups. Importantly, this framework is grounded not only in relevant theoretical insights but also in the practical realities of K-12 education. Much like Rich Milner's opportunity gap framework (Milner, 2012), my findings offer a viable lens through which schools serving Black students can assess their effectiveness and identify areas for improvement in creating supportive, equitable learning environments.

My findings also complexified the field's understanding of Black student success as more than just student performance on academic assessments, but also encompasses a multi-layered concept that is deeply intertwined with Black folks' unique histories within and outside of schools. As the literature review in Chapter 2 demonstrated, dominant conceptions of student success are deeply rooted in White supremacy. Historically, Black communities have defined success differently from White communities because our societal standing has necessitated a broader, more profound understanding of educational success—one that extends beyond

academic achievement to encompass communal uplift, empowerment, and the fight for equity. This study built upon previous works from scholars such as Anderson (1988), Givens (2023), Rickford (2015), and Woodson (1993), by offering a contemporary examination of what success means for Black students. The findings derived from this research have implications for educator training and development and offer new insights into how schools can better foster Black student achievement.

As this research focused exclusively on Black students, I believe it offers evidence-based insights that can be adapted across various contexts to achieve similar outcomes for other non-dominant student groups. With the rapid demographic shift underway in K-12 schools in the United States (Mordechay et al., 2019), I believe this framework and this studies methodological design can contribute to our understanding of how schools can better meet the academic and nonacademic needs of non-dominant students. As my research demonstrates, there is an urgent need to problematize traditional notions of success and school efficacy, particularly since White students no longer comprise the majority in K-12 public schools (Thompson & Thompson, 2018). In any industry, when the clientele changes, common logics and universally understood concepts must evolve to reflect contemporary needs. Failure to do so in K-12 and broader educational spaces risks providing services that are outdated and unresponsive to the realities of today's student population.

### **Summary of Findings & Explanation of Framework**

In this section, I detail the constructs within my framework and situate my findings within the existing literature that examines school practices, procedures, and policies that enhance Black student achievement. Additionally, I discuss how my participants' descriptions of Black student success align with and/or expand current literature on the subject. My analysis

aims to demonstrate how identity-conscious approaches to schooling can be transformative for Black students' in-school experiences. I conclude with implications and recommendations for education research and practice, reimagining schools as spaces of empowerment, cultural affirmation, and transformative learning for Black students.

My research endeavor was guided by the belief that while education for Black students in the United States has been fraught with persistent disparities, these challenges do not stem from intellectual deficiencies of Black students, but instead from systemic inequities and institutional practices that routinely lead to the marginalization and minimization of Black students. The research I conducted at McCune High School (MHS) and Redd Elementary School (RES) sought to identify and analyze the characteristics, practices, and policies that have disrupted these inequities, providing an instructive guide for other schools aiming to achieve similar outcomes. Grounded theory methodology led to the creation of a budding framework on effective schools for Black students comprised of three constructs: intentionality with Blackness, comprehensive ecosystem of support, and justice-centered school culture (see Figure 7). I begin with a brief summary of how different stakeholders conceptualized Black student success and then provide a description of each construct and elaborate on the interdependent relationships of each construct within the framework.

### **Reframing Black Student Success**

My dissertation research aimed to expand traditional understandings of student success by probing various stakeholders' perceptions of student success and exploring how Blackness mediates their conceptualization of the concept. A primary discovery from this study is alignment between stakeholders' views on Black student success at their respective school sites. At McCune, all the educators that I spoke with emphasized academic proficiency as a critical

component of student success, but also extended their definition beyond academic mastery to include life skills such as perseverance and interpersonal growth, which they viewed as equally essential. For Black students specifically, McCune educators expressed that successful Black students need the same attributes to excel as other successful students, but that Black students face unique challenges in being required to navigate racially hostile environments. The notion that successful Black students must do more to achieve the same outcomes as their peers of other races was echoed by the caregivers at McCune. Caregiver participants explained that they chose McCune to ensure their children had access to opportunities often denied to Black students. While caregivers acknowledged the importance of good grades, they also stressed the need for their children to apply what they learn in real-world contexts and to persevere through the challenges they inevitably face both within and beyond high school because they are Black.

The Black student participants from McCune strongly disagreed with the notion that success is solely tied to academic performance. They emphasized that student success should be defined by each individual student, but also noted that for Black students, in particular, success means persisting through the numerous obstacles faced in society. While all stakeholders that I spoke to at McCune acknowledged the importance of academic proficiency in line with traditional views of success, they also believed that, due to the unique experiences of Black students, Black student success requires strong navigational skills and a robust sense of identity to withstand external challenges.

Educators at Redd Elementary shared a similar perspective with those at McCune, emphasizing the importance of academic mastery while firmly expressing their belief that for Black students to succeed, rigorous academics must be paired with intentional identity development. Educators at Redd shared stories of Black students who they considered successful

not solely because of their grades, but because of their ability to think critically and make informed decisions. At Redd, a successful Black student is defined not just by academic achievement but by pride in their identity and their potential as a future change agent. Educators stressed that for a Black student to succeed, they must have a deep understanding of themselves and a strong sense of responsibility to their community. For educators at Redd, students' deep understanding of themselves was very much tied to an understanding of Black history, but also extended to other parts of student identity such as gender or religion.

The caregivers at Redd were the only stakeholder group that did not mention academic proficiency in their conceptions of Black student success, instead focusing on mental health and identity formation. For these caregivers, academic performance was secondary to ensuring their children were kind—both to others and to themselves. Many caregivers explained that they sent their children to Redd with the hope that they would develop a strong foundation, which they considered essential to Black student success. For the parents in this study, a strong foundation was not about academics, but students developing a love and understanding for who they are and their varied identities. This collective understanding of success, shared across stakeholders, played a pivotal role in shaping a school environment that prioritized the holistic development of Black students.

Lastly, the educational researchers who participated in this study emphasized the school environment as the primary determinant of student success, rather than focusing on individual attributes. These scholars spent less time discussing personal traits that contribute to success and more time highlighting environmental factors that foster it—factors that are often denied to Black students. One participant even suggested that attempting to define Black student success as requiring more than what other students need furthers the dehumanization of Black students. He

asserted that this was done by expecting them to demonstrate agency and resilience long before they should be called upon to do so. While the researchers acknowledged that academic mastery is typically viewed as the primary measure of success, they argued for a broader understanding of success that includes achievements in social skills, the arts, and other non-academic domains. Additionally, they emphasized the critical importance of placing Black students in environments that affirm and celebrate their identities.

In conclusion, the majority of participants in this study expressed that while Black student success is linked to academic mastery, it cannot be solely measured by academic performance. To fully grasp the distinctive dimensions of success valued by the Black community, it is essential to consider the unique challenges and historical context that shape these understandings. The stakeholders I interviewed recognized that traditional markers of academic proficiency alone are insufficient for Black students, as these standards often fail to address or counteract the persistent effects of anti-Blackness that harm Black people in society and education. This awareness reflects a collective understanding, grounded in a long history of resistance, that academic success for Black students must encompass more than conventional metrics; it must also equip Black students with tools to navigate and resist structural oppression. The desire to nurture a deep, historically grounded sense of identity among Black students is not only a form of personal development but also a strategic means of building solidarity amongst Black folks within a society structured by White supremacy. This approach emphasizes collective resilience and community support, constructing a shared foundation that both acknowledges and counters the social forces working against Black individuals. Through these shared values, stakeholders are envisioning model of success that empowers students to thrive

academically while staying rooted in an understanding of their identity and their community's ongoing struggle for equity.

### **Framework Constructs:**

In this section I briefly summarize the constructs of my framework and provide a detailed explanation of the relationship between these constructs to illustrate how they converge to create effective schools for Black students. I again identify these as constructs because they abstract concepts that serve as foundational elements in this framework.

### **Intentionality with Blackness**

Anti-Black racism creates a dehumanizing and degrading narrative about Blackness that influences the way non-Black and even Black people see, hear, and respond to Black folks. Those racialized as Black cannot escape anti-Blackness in any aspect of life, including schooling. However, my research found that part of what must occur in school for Black students to succeed is not just the rejection color-blindness or being anti-racist, but there must be an explicit, consistent, and system-wide attempt to challenge anti-Black practices and ideologies within all part of the schooling environment. Intentionality with Blackness entails a critical re-evaluation of how Blackness—and those racialized as Black—are depicted, represented, and engaged within the school environment. Both MHS and Redd demonstrate a deep commitment to creating learning environments that honor and celebrate Black students. Intentionality with Blackness did not just exist on the surface with the hiring of Black staff, though the hiring of Black staff is an integral feature; curriculum, policies, grading, celebrations, and other facets of school life must broadcast consistent messaging that Black is beautiful and boundless. The leaders I interviewed at both schools shared that Black students often face unique challenges and, therefore, require tailored approaches that extend beyond generic educational strategies.



Intentionality with Blackness calls for consistent action at all levels—administrative, curricular, and interpersonal—to align with broader systems of support. Fostering pride and cultivating a counternarrative of Blackness within school environments are paramount for creating a sense of belonging for Black students and a belief that Black students can succeed.

### **Comprehensive Ecosystem of Support (CES)**

The field of ecology insists that no ecosystem thrives without the contributions of all actors within that given environment (Tansley, 1935). I conceive of a school as a complex ecosystem that relies on all actors fulfilling their responsibilities in order for the entity and its inhabitants to perform at an optimal level. A key finding is that both schools provided an intricate network of support to create environments of care and connectivity between all stakeholders, ensuring they have their essential needs met. This ecosystem includes but is not limited to: strong community partnerships, parental engagement, and a school culture that prioritizes the holistic well-being of students, caregivers, and educators. Though a CES is designed to promote student achievement, findings revealed that when caregivers and educators have their needs met they are better equipped to nurture and guide students toward success. Supportive networks for educators are particularly important in high-need urban schools, such as the sites in this study, because they prevent burnout and turnover which negatively impact student achievement. Black teachers were instrumental in the success of Black students at these schools, and these sites have successfully recruited and retained a high number of Black teachers by ensuring they feel protected, supported, and cared for. Furthermore, this support is integral for Black caregivers because it not only mitigates the impact of resource scarcity, but also establishes Black caregivers as valued members of the school community. Black students do not

thrive at these schools because of their extraordinary displays of “grit” but because they are in supportive environments where educators strive for the wellness for all stakeholders.

### **Justice-Centered School Culture**

School culture is commonly understood as an amalgamation of school policy and educators’ practices that shape the educational experiences of their student body. A substantial body of research explores the correlation between strong school culture and student academic achievement (Howard & Milner, 2019; Khalifa, 2018; Lee & Louis, 2019). Justice-centered school culture brings forth core ideas of justice and applies it within the context of schooling. Within educational context, justice is as defined by Howard (2024) as, “recognizing each person’s humanity and providing the basic necessities that allow each person to be seen, heard, valued, and recognized” (p.13). I define justice-centered school culture as school environments where educators are cognizant of the historical and contemporary injustices that inordinately harm non-dominant student groups and develop agentive practices intended to rectify or disrupt these educational inequities. At McCune and Redd, the most notable features of their justice-centered school culture were high expectations for all stakeholders and contextually grounded engagement and praxis. Research consistently underscores the importance of setting high expectations for students, particularly Black students, who are often among those most likely to be perceived as intellectually inept (Gershenson et al., 2016; Nasir, 2011). A defining feature at both sites was that not only were Black students held to high standards, but educators and caregivers were also equally accountable to high expectations. Additionally, context is crucial; educators at both sites recognized that the Black students and caregivers they serve navigate a distinct social reality. As a result, they provide an educational approach and engagement style that were carefully tailored to that reality.

## Connections Between Constructs

Though these three constructs can exist within school spaces independent of one another, my research found that these schools were highly effective in fostering Black student achievement due to the combined impact of these three concepts. In other words, there may be schools that align with one or two of the constructs within the framework, but I believe the effects of each concept are maximized when they occur in concert with one another. Borrowing from systems theory, my research found a reciprocal causality relationship between the constructs in this framework, where each construct is impacted by the others. Reciprocal causality is a theoretical explanation that asserts components of a system interact in ways that influence each other, creating a loop (Bertalanffy, 2017; Bertalanffy, 2003). This loop becomes a process of mutual reinforcement that maximizes the effect of each component. Embedded within each of these constructs are the beliefs surrounding Black student success as identified by stakeholders. I will now explain the synergistic relationship between these constructs (see Figure 7).

### *Intentionality with Blackness:*

Connection to & Impact of CES: An ecosystem of support for Black students cannot function without recognizing and affirming the specific needs of Black people. Such ecosystems of support I observed at MHS and Redd were impactful because stakeholders viewed Black people from an assets-based perspective. Based on my research, I do not believe that all of these stakeholders entered these spaces with an asset-based perspective of Black folks, but this viewpoint emerged over time as a result of being continually enveloped in these school environments. A crucial element for these systems of support at both sites was that Black students and caregivers benefited from connections to Black staff. The intentional hiring and

retention of Black staff at all levels of the schooling environment led to the forming of communal bonds that were integral to the school's thriving ecosystem of support. This did not result from presence of Black adults alone but occurred because these Black educators reported taking on greater levels of responsibility toward supporting the academic achievement of Black students. I observed a mutual respect among all stakeholders and support system that reinforced both Black students' sense of belonging and their ability to thrive. Additionally, Black teachers also reported that Black school leaders and their fellow Black teachers combined as a protective factor that increased job satisfaction.

Connection to & Impact of Justice-Centered School Culture: Intentionality with Blackness is primarily concerned with redefining traditional depictions and engagements with Blackness. Schools cannot cultivate a justice-centered school culture without widespread awareness of the beliefs, ideologies, and practices that have inordinately harmed Black students. Theoretical experts of anti-Blackness such as Michael Dumas and kihana ross frame anti-Blackness as an ineradicable phenomenon; however, they do express belief that its harm can be mitigated if properly grappled with by individuals in the space (Dumas, 2016; Dumas & ross, 2016). The justice-centered school cultures I examined in this research were possible because the educators in these schools constantly called out patterns of anti-Black racism and sought out ways to disrupt it.

*Comprehensive Ecosystem of Support:*

Connection to & Impact of Intentionality with Blackness: In many ways, the CES that I observed at both sites reflected Black cultural values of collective communal responsibility. During this research process, countless Black educators and caregivers I spoke with both formally and informally conveyed that these schools were special because Black folks were, "looking out for

each other.” The embrace of Black cultural values at each site led to a disruption of normative individualistic approaches to schooling, and instead emphasized the importance of the community. Black educators, Black students, and Black caregivers in this study often referenced each other and themselves as family members, often using terms such as, auntie, school mom, and other grandma. The ecosystems at both sites are highly dependent on Black collectivist orientations.

Connection to & Impact of Justice-Centered School Culture: A Comprehensive ecosystem of support is particularly important for historically disadvantaged student populations who lack material resources, which aligns with the premise of justice-centered school culture. Aristotle once said that justice means, “equals should be treated equally and unequals, unequally.” A CES may not be integral to effective schools in well-resourced White communities because those students’ individual families have enough social and material capital to undergird their success. White educators may not require a CES in the same way because they do not experience schools in the same manner as Black educators. However, the justice-centered school environments recognize the unique needs of Black students and staff and ensure all parties have the targeted supports they need to be successful.

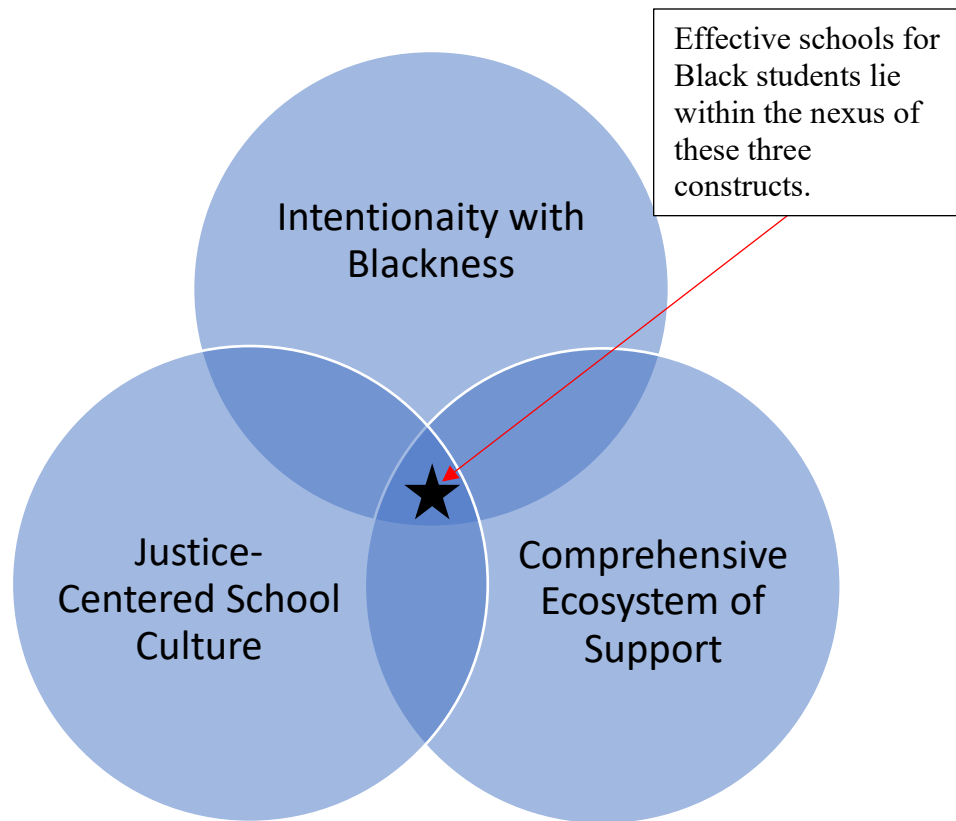
*Justice-Centered School Culture:*

Connection to and Impact of CES: Justice-centered school cultures are sustained through an ecosystem of support. The work of justice is arduous and constant; therefore, a justice-centered school culture cannot exist without staff members who are provided the requisite resources and assistance to perform their job at optimal levels. A CES ensures that school staff that work with Black students are supported and can, in turn, engage in practice that ensures Black students have their academic and non-academic needs met. Ecosystems of support extend beyond the

classroom, supporting students' academic needs because educators in justice-centered schools recognize that student learning is affected by a myriad of factors outside of school. The more support that a school can provide to students and their families, the better students perform in school.

Connection to & Impact of Intentionality with Blackness: Intentionality with Blackness as framed within this study operates in direct alignment with the practices of justice-centered school culture. In fact, I would argue that these schools are grounded in justice and a desire to transform existing patterns of educational hardship for Black students because they are intentional in centering Blackness. Hiring of Black staff, creation of curricular materials that positively depict Blackness, and providing exposure to an array of opportunities often denied to Black students are all aspects of justice-centered culture because it insists upon presenting Black folks in the light they deserve. Justice-centered culture requires meaningful changes to common practices and approaches to schooling; at the two sites I studied, that change came about through deliberate centering of Black voices, narratives, and experiences at every level.

Figure 7. Effective Schools for Black Students



### Relation to Prior research

Though the theory that emerged from this study is grounded in the data gathered during this research, grounded theory methodology requires that researchers engage in a thorough review of relevant literature on the topic of study before embarking on their research endeavors (Glaser, 1978; Martin & Gynnild, 2011). As a result, during my data analysis, I identified substantial alignment between my findings and existing literature on effective schools for Black students. In the following section, I discuss the areas where my research findings converge with established educational research across the following domains:

1. Organizational structure and institutional culture
2. School leadership
3. Teachers, curriculum, and pedagogy

These three domains were selected in order to return to the literature review in Chapter 2 and demonstrate how my findings align with previous literature and research. While these bodies of

literature are conceptually separate, there are overlaps in how my findings align with the literature within each domain.

### Organizational Structure and Institutional Culture

The multi-stakeholder design of this research, coupled with more than 50 hours of observation at each site, enabled me to gather unique insights into the daily functioning of both schools in this study. As my findings demonstrated, the two schools in this study were not identical in their daily practices and broader school policies; however, their organizational and institutional cultures had a myriad of similarities, many of which reflect relevant literature on effective organizational culture/structure. At both school sites I observed the presence of a strong, well-structured bureaucracy that was a key factor in driving student success at these schools in ways consistent with Weber's principles of organizational efficiency (Weber, 1978). In alignment with core ideals of organizational theory, McCune and Redd had well-defined processes, clear hierarchies, and formalized rules that help these schools operate effectively and support student success (Jones, 2010; Manning, 2013). Confirming the work of Senge (2014), schools are highly complex organizations; and during my time at each site, I witnessed educators encounter an array of challenges and obstacles that arose on a daily basis. What's more, had they done so without efficient and effective systems at each site, student success would have been compromised. The organizational structure within both schools ensured that educators were enveloped in support and clearly understood their roles. As the work of Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) suggests, this understanding significantly decreased burnout.

The organizational structure at each institution impacted school culture. While the two schools in the study have varied racial demographics, I encountered similar institutional cultures that were grounded in a commitment to supporting the needs of Black students and families.



Though both the schools in my study were K-12 institutions, their culture and climate shared attributes commonly found in HBCUs. Existent literature suggests that Black students perform better at HBCUs than in PWI's because HBCUs offer Black students psychologically safer environments, more supportive staff, and culturally affirming educational practices compared to PWIs (Albritton, 2012; Allen, 1992; Wilson, 2007). Aligned with the work of scholars such as Case (1997), Ladson-Billings (2009), and Rickford (2015), the K-12 sites in my study provided similar supports to Black students through intentional programming designed to support their wellness, the formation of fictive kinship and practice of "other mothering", and the adaption of school curriculum and pedagogy in a manner that is reflective of Black culture. Empirical evidence underscores the significance of a sense of belonging in facilitating the academic success of Black students (Howard, 2024; Walton & Cohen, 2007).

Consistent with this research, the cultural environments at both schools were notable for successfully instilling a profound sense of belonging among their Black student populations, a factor that was pivotal to said students' educational achievement. In concert with the work of scholars such as Hilliard (1995) and Perry (2004), the cultures at these school sites were reflective of the values of Black students and their families. Moreover, aligned with the work of Spencer and Ullucci (2023), these sites employed intentional approaches to de-center whiteness and mitigate the impact of anti-Blackness because they recognize the positive impact it has on Black student achievement. Although Black students were the primary focus of this protective culture, it is essential that safe and supportive environment for Black individuals extends to Black educators, who likewise benefit from a school culture that values and safeguards their well-being. As found in the work of Pizarro and Kohli (2018), the educators in this school site

were able to perform to optimal levels because their organizational culture was a protective mechanism for teachers of color in particular.

Further, aligned with the work of Comer (1980), the meaningful partnerships between the school, the broader community, and caregivers were a key driver for success at both sites. My findings aligned with existing research that demonstrates student achievement is enhanced when students attend schools that provide high levels of engagement with caregivers and the broader community (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Barton et al., 2004; Grant & Ray, 2018). The culture and daily functioning that I observed at both school sites are reflective of Milner's (2020) opportunity gap framework, which argues that effective schools for marginalized students must attend to gaps in opportunity between historically disadvantaged and advantaged students. Though this study was conducted in 2023, much of the findings on supporting Black student achievement are similar to those of historical research on Black students in public education (Anderson, 1988; Givens, 2023; Walker, 1996). The academic success achieved by Black students at each of these sites is not due to an abundance of either school's resources but can instead be primarily attributed to McCune and Redd's ability to create schools where educators harbor a deep belief in the capabilities of Black students while cultivating a school environment designed for the racial and communal uplift of Black students.

### School leadership

The school administrators that I studied at McCune and Redd were a living embodiment of much of the literature on culturally responsive and inclusive school leadership. Similar to the scholarship of Khalifa (2018) and Dantley and Tillman (2006), my research found that school leaders developing inclusive environments that are sensitive to the needs of Black students and families are integral to Black student success. In alignment with the work of Gardiner and

Enomoto (2006), the leaders at both sites detailed the formation of meaningful relationships with all stakeholders and constant self-reflection as the primary drivers of their success as school leaders at their sites. My findings support the work of Ishimaru (2013) as I found that leaders in effective schools for Black students frequently seek out and value the perspectives of parents and community on school-wide practices and approaches toward educating students. These leaders were similar to the school leaders studied in Khalifa's (2012) work in that they positioned themselves as servants, rather than saviors, of the community, and consequently engaged in practices that sought to improve the school and better the community. Additionally, as discussed by Skiba et al. (Skiba & Peterson, 2000) and Theoharis (2007), the leaders I studied regularly reflected on school data to uncover and address disparities in academic outcomes among students, particularly those involving Black students.

However, as Carolyn Riehl (2000) explains, culturally responsive school leaders' responsibilities extend beyond their own daily practice, and they must impact the practice and daily habits of all school employees. The leaders at both school sites were in concert with the scholarship of Khalifa (2012, 2018) and Theoharis (2007) in that they clearly conveyed their vision of the school to their staff. The level of alignment I discovered amongst stakeholders is not possible without clear communication from school leadership. School leaders at both sites shared that they are major proponents of culturally responsive curriculum and adapted school curriculum as Villegas & Lucas (2002) suggest. Similar to Tillman (2005), this study also found that inclusive school leaders' model desired behavior for school staff because they recognize they set a tone of what is and is not allowed in the school environment. McCune's principals and Redd's are former classroom teachers and regularly modeled culturally responsive instruction for teachers as Madhlangobe and Gordon (2012) recommend. Outside of instructional modeling,

these leaders also ensured that their teachers were provided with a wealth of professional development opportunities to improve inclusive practice as advised by the research of Wlodkowski & Ginsberg (1995).

Additionally, as highlighted by Davis (2002) and Flessa (2009), the school leaders in this study were intentional about disrupting deficit-based perspectives of Black students and families and constantly conveyed to staff how students and families bring valuable strengths to the educational process. Reminiscent of the work of Perry (2004), these leaders successfully developed counternarratives of Blackness that positively influenced all stakeholders' actions and beliefs about Black students. Furthermore, I found that these educators constantly sought out opportunities to incorporate the cultural and social capital of students, as noted in Khalifa's (2010, 2012) studies. This research supports the claim that effective schools are not possible without strong leadership (Allen et al., 2015; Ramsey, 2006).

#### Teachers, curriculum, and pedagogy

The study's findings also substantiate the claim that culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy can have a profound influence on Black student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Emdin, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Like the findings of Rubie-Davies et al. (2015), I observed that teachers at both school sites were consistently held to the high expectations of delivering high-quality instruction to and engaging in culturally responsive practice with their students. Furthermore, supporting the work of Howard et al. (2020), my findings demonstrated that for Black students in particular, formation of meaningful relationships with educators contributed greatly to their academic achievement. Black students and caregivers alike repeatedly mentioned the importance of teachers effectively communicating care and empathy, which aligns with previous work (Howard, 2024; Howard, 2001; Warren, 2013; Warren, 2018)

that insist teachers who exhibit empathetic dispositions have a beneficial effect on Black student achievement. Building upon the work of Ladson-Billings (2022) and Collins (1995), the caring behaviors that teachers at both sites engaged in were reflective of cultural and communal values that are distinctly found within the Black community— a primary reason why these caring behaviors were effective.

My research findings are also a contemporary manifestation of much of what Givens (2021) details of Black educators in the Jim Crow South. The teachers in this study, particularly the Black educators, navigated, resisted, and disrupted dominant White supremacist educational systems. As the recent work of Watson and Marie (2022) explains, many normative approaches to schools are antithetical to the wellness of Black children; therefore in order for these teachers to be effective in educating Black students, they had to operate outside of the norm. Additionally, my research supported the claim often recited in educational research that Black teachers have a significant impact on educational outcomes for Black students (Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019; De Royston et al., 2017; Yarnell & Bohrnstedt, 2018). These teachers were not impactful simply because they were Black, but rather as Nasir (2011) explains, because they were sensitive to and responsive toward Black students' racialized identities and experiences.

The pedagogical and curricular approaches evident in nearly all instructional practices at McCune and Redd classrooms closely aligns with the foundational scholarship of Au (1980), Gay (1994, 2000, 2018), and Ladson-Billings (1995, 2009), characterized by a pervasive reflection of and affirmation for Black students' identity, history, and intellectual agency. Teachers openly shared that they strove to empower Black students through curriculum that embraced their cultural heritage and intellectual capacity—as the work of Baldwin (2006) and Hillard (1995) recommends for teachers of Black students. Moreover, similar to the scholarship

of Muhammad (2020) and Hammond (2014), the delivery of culturally relevant instruction in no way came at the expense of academic rigor, but instead enhanced learning for Black students. The teachers in this study fostered better outcomes for Black students because they engaged in practical curricular and pedagogical adaptations to foster a sense of belonging for Black students, which is integral to the success in school, as research consistently demonstrates (Howard, 2020; Love, 2019; Muhammad, 2020). This approach to teaching is essential for supporting the academic achievement of Black students even in classrooms where they are not the majority or attending racially diverse schools—a rarity in itself. As found in this study, fostering inclusive environments for Black students does not detract from the educational experiences of other students but instead enriches the learning community as a whole.

### **Implications for Education Research**

My findings have far-reaching implications for educational research on Black students and other non-dominant groups in K-12 settings, underscoring the imperative of methodological innovation. Notably, this study's multi-stakeholder design serves as a paradigmatic model for future investigations into school efficacy, highlighting the limitations of traditional educator-centric approaches. By relying solely on educator perspectives, conventional research methods provide an incomplete understanding of the complex dynamics driving school outcomes. This narrow focus overlooks the multifaceted nature of successful schools, which, by consensus, require the harmonious interplay of various stakeholders to foster effective learning environments. To grasp an in-depth understanding of the intricacies of a school site, it is essential to adopt a multi-stakeholder research approach that facilitates triangulation of diverse perspectives beyond the educator's lens. This approach is supported by some organizational theorists who advocate for the deconstruction of traditional leadership matrices to incorporate the

often-overlooked voices of marginal groups (Friedman & Miles, 2002). As Calton and Kurland (1996) astutely observed, "empowering the silent voices of marginal groups through the deconstruction of hidden meanings within the predominant organizational context enables multiple stakeholder discourses" (p. 164). This study's engagement with multiple stakeholder discourses—encompassing caregivers, students, and educational experts—was instrumental in elucidating the comprehensive strategies employed by these schools to promote Black student success.

The second implication of this research is the need to further explore the distinction between good schools for Black students, versus good schools with Black students. One afternoon during my observation at McCune High School, I attended a student-led Black history performance. Sitting in that auditorium, I witnessed a vibrant display of Black joy as students read poems, performed step routines, sang songs, and recited speeches on Black history. The entire gym was enthralled in this performance as students, parents, and school staff cheered on the performers. My research methodology necessitated analytic memos after each site observation, and this particular day I began to vacillate on the idea of a '*good school for Black students versus a good school with Black students.*' There are thousands of schools across the country with a plethora of resources, highly qualified educators, and a demonstrated record of producing stellar academic outcomes; however just because Black students display academic proficiency in these schools does not mean these are good schools for Black students. My research found that Black stakeholders and educational researchers place value on a myriad of different factors beyond academic achievement as measures of school quality and student success, though white-dominant research does not account for them.

A 2020 exposé published in the Los Angeles Times, written by Jill Shah, detailed how Black students in private schools across L.A. County had endured racially hostile K-12 spaces and were frequently victims of hate speech from peers (Shah, 2020). These K-12 institutions are, in theory, “good schools” for some students, but I ardently challenge the idea these are good schools for Black students. Rather, these are “good schools” that just so happen to have Black students attending them (i.e. good schools with Black students), but there is nothing specific done to ensure the safety, protection, and success of Black students. I would even go so far and state that our very conception of “good schools” does not account for the experiences of Black students.

By contrast, I deem the two schools I studied as ‘good schools for Black students’ because outside of the stellar academic performance that students consistently display, these spaces elicit Black joy and unapologetically work toward ensuring that Black students are physically, socially, and psychologically safe. Because the scope of this research did not include schools that would be deemed “good schools with Black students,” there is a need to further explore this distinction and complexify how good schools for different student demographic require different attributes. However, similar research has been conducted at the higher education level which consistently shows that while schools such as UCLA and Harvard are highly ranked institutions with enormous endowments and world-renowned educators, these spaces are often racially hostile and isolating for Black collegians which negatively impacts their academic achievement (Mwangi et al., 2018; Solórzano et al., 2000). By contrast, HBCUs often rank lower on national rankings and have a paucity of resources in comparison to PWIs, but Black students at HBCU often outperform Black students at PWIs across several dimensions, such as academic achievement, social engagement, and mental well-being (Allen, 1992; Palmer et al., 2015).



One of the distinct features commonly found at HBCUs that I also encountered at my focal schools is Black folks, including students, feeling a sense of ownership or connection to their educational institutions. At McCune and Redd, Black students and parents often referred to the school as “our school” or being a “Black school,” which I found to significantly increase parents’ willingness to be engaged in school-site activities and to support educators. My research uncovered that the Black stakeholders held a real stake at these sites and felt a sense of ownership in the institutions for three key reasons: 1) a substantial Black presence, 2) involvement and recognition of Black caregivers and community members in school spaces, and 3) Black students who matriculated through these institutions exhibited qualities that were valued by Black people. Further investigation is needed to understand how to cultivate a greater sense of ownership within school environments for Black individuals, considering the historically exclusionary nature of educational institutions for Black communities, and to explore the impact that this sense of ownership has and could have on the educational experiences and outcomes of Black students. Given that urban schools have persistently struggled to engage Black caregivers and community members in school spaces (Hong, 2021), my findings challenge that trend, offering valuable insights that warrant further exploration to deepen our understanding of how to effectively engage Black stakeholders who are not employed within school settings in these learning spaces.

Third, there is a need to further explore the impact of school sites that prioritize the needs of Black students in academic spaces that are not predominately Black. McCune High School is a majority LatinX school, but as this research revealed, retains a firm commitment amongst its educators to support the needs of Black students. It was beyond the scope of this study to fully explore how non-Black students were impacted by the practices at each of these sites. Yet data at

both sites reveals that non-Black students still perform above the district average on multiple measures of academic achievement. There is a belief within education that meeting the needs of Black students is the “tide that lifts all boats.” Meaning that if we support those most vulnerable in schools, it benefits all students. Research is needed to buttress that claim and explore how Black educators specifically navigate changing racial demographics in their schools and ensure protection for Black students even when they are not the majority of the student population. Though Black students are most commonly found in predominately Black schools (Orfield, 2020), a growing number of Black students attend suburban schools that are not predominately Black (Tyler et al., 2016) and research is needed on how schools are responding to this increase in their Black student population.

My research is particularly important for regions like Los Angeles and California as a whole, where Black students are a small percentage of the population but comprise a substantial number of students within large, diverse school districts. In the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), for instance, Black students account for roughly eight percent of the district’s nearly 500,000 students—amounting to around 40,000 students (LAUSD, 2024). This population of Black students alone would make up one of the largest school districts in the country, underscoring the scale and significance of prioritizing Black student success in racially mixed educational settings. Addressing the needs of this substantial group within LAUSD and beyond is not only achievable but crucial, as we have the opportunity to better serve tens of thousands of Black students who are currently underserved.

Finally, more research is needed to expand our notions of what is possible for Black students in K-12 schools. As previously stated, this research was inspired by my past experiences as a classroom teacher searching for approaches to support the academic achievement of my

Black students. While it is crucial to further educational research that highlights what is not working for Black students, we also need research on what is working. Since schools in the United States often fail to meet the needs of Black students, there are limited examples of schools that succeed in doing so. This study underscores a crucial finding: not only can effective schooling for Black students exist, but it can also manifest in diverse forms. This highlights the potential for varied context-dependent solutions. There is a lot to be learned from a predominately Black elementary school in Los Angeles with a Sankofa bird as a mascot that is also a Blue-Ribbon school. Additionally, there is much to be gained from studying a low-income Black and Brown high school in the middle of Watts that sends more Black students to the UC system than any other school in the country. I believe that schools like McCune and Redd can be found in other locales, and we should engage in in-depth research and explorations of those schools' policies and practices to understand how we can replicate these approaches to support Black student achievement across the country.

### **Implications for Educational Practice**

Based on the findings of this research, a plethora of implications for educational practice emerged. Rather than reiterating the constructs within my framework, I will explain the implications of this research for educational practice at a meta level. Grounded in the broader themes identified across the two schools studied, these recommendations stem from the underlying premise of my framework: namely, that effective schools for historically disadvantaged students address the social and resource vulnerabilities that subvert the potential of marginalized student groups. By “vulnerability,” I refer to the heightened susceptibility of these students to systemic inequities. While this study centered the needs of Black students, I believe these foundational ideas of attending to student vulnerability extend to other historically

disadvantaged student groups as well, and that addressing these vulnerabilities is essential for promoting equitable student outcomes and fostering school efficacy in the United States.

### *Social vulnerability*

Within the context of this study, social vulnerability encompasses the systemic issues—such as racism, stigmatization, exclusion, and lack of support networks—that historically disadvantaged students face, all of which impact their sense of identity and academic outcomes. As my findings demonstrated, the schools chronicled in this dissertation cultivated effective learning environments for Black students by actively seeking to disrupt anti-Blackness and affirming Black students belonging at school. Perry (2004) explains that schools that support Black students' achievement develop a counternarrative of Blackness that disrupts dominant, pathologizing views. She asserts that prevailing views of Blackness can have a deleterious effect on Black students' sense of identity and influence educators' perceptions, which together have a compounding impact on Black students' academic performance. However, when schools intentionally develop counternarratives and celebrate Blackness, Black students begin to see their identity as a source of strength, and educators adjust their practices accordingly. The sites in my study exemplify this disruption of mainstream views of Blackness, as attending to the social vulnerability of Black students is integral to their overall school culture.

In the same way that schools can cultivate counternarratives that reimagine and affirm Blackness, educational practitioners should aim to develop analogous counternarratives for LGBTQ+, students with disabilities, and other historically marginalized student groups whose educational trajectories are likewise influenced by social vulnerability and concomitant outcome disparities. To effectively do so, schools need to engage in collaborative initiatives that center the voices and experiences of these student groups toward ensuring that the

counternarrative is reflective of the views of the people most impacted. For example, Lee (1996) challenged the model minority myth often attributed to Asian American students by arguing that this monolithic conception ignores the varied experiences of Asian American students and overlooks those who face significant academic challenges. Like Perry, Lee calls for educators to develop more nuanced narratives of Asian American students in hopes of better addressing their diverse needs. Another example of addressing social vulnerability can be found in the work of C.J. Pascoe (Arum et al., 2010). In her seminal work "*Dude, You're a F\*g*," Pascoe explores how mainstream gender norms shape students' experiences in educational spaces, particularly harming students who do not conform to traditional gender norms. Like Perry and Lee, Pascoe urges educators to develop more inclusive conceptions of non-dominant student populations, in this case in consideration of gender, to create safer, more welcoming school environments for all students. Each of these scholars highlights how dominant narratives about marginalized groups significantly affect student learning and argues that to improve academic achievement for these groups, educators must redefine narratives and common conceptions of these student groups.

While each of the above detailed scholarship focuses on addressing the social vulnerability of different student groups, the common throughline is that to support the academic achievement of historically disadvantaged students, harmful, dominant narratives within educational systems must be dismantled and replaced with inclusive, affirming frameworks that recognize and support the full humanity and potential of all students. As Pollock (2017) explains, this work cannot be accomplished in a single professional development session but must instead permeate all aspects of the school environment. School personnel at the two schools in this study are mindful of the physical aesthetics, both within and outside of the school setting, which portray Blackness as vibrant and beautiful. Additionally, a significant number of the school staff

were Black, and hiring practices intentionally vetted new staff members for their perspectives on Blackness. The schools also ensured that staff had a perspective of Black excellence and the resources to provide students with rigorous curricula that not only featured Blackness but also positively depicted it. Attending to social vulnerability through the development of counternarratives is a complex and multifaceted endeavor, but as my study demonstrated, it can wield a powerful impact on student achievement.

### *Resource Vulnerability*

While social vulnerability has a tremendous impact on student achievement, resources are also as critical. In this research, resource vulnerability refers to insufficient access to essential educational tools, such as quality instruction, adequate facilities, and learning materials. Given the structure of public education in the United States, social vulnerability often correlates with resource scarcity, meaning that the students who are most socially vulnerable are frequently provided with the fewest resources to succeed (Anyon, 2012; Kozol, 1992). Over 80% of the students in the schools studied in this dissertation were identified as socioeconomically disadvantaged, according to the California dashboard (California School Dashboard, 2022). Students attending these schools, however, thrived within resource-rich environments, thanks to educators who actively sought to mitigate the resource challenges faced by their students. These schools addressed the context-specific needs of their students, such as providing laptops and after-school enrichment programs, which educators identified as critical for student success. Noguera and colleagues (2016) emphasize that resource support for marginalized students is integral to addressing educational inequities and that targeted resource distribution is essential to achieving this aim. One of the primary contributors propelling student success at these schools was an abundance of resources specifically tailored to student needs. Both school principals

conveyed that whenever their students required resources that were unavailable within the school, it was their responsibility to fulfill that need by seeking external resources and bringing those supports into the learning space.

At both schools that I studied, educators acknowledged that many of their students and families faced economic hardships, but they did not interpret these challenges as a justification to lower expectations. Instead, they sought to understand the specific needs of their respective student bodies and proactively pursued opportunities to fill resource gaps. Traditionally, resource support in education is associated with access to textbooks and technology, but as Gorski (2017) explains, targeted resource support must extend beyond material provisions and address the systemic inequities that impact educational opportunities and life outcomes. For example, the schools in this study developed targeted support strategies, including smaller class sizes, access to advanced coursework, and tutoring and mentoring programs. They also provided vital services such as mental health support and access to food, which are essential for student well-being. Resource support further extended to ensuring teacher quality. Research shows that students from low-income backgrounds are often subjected to inexperienced and underqualified teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Gershenson, 2015). To combat this, these schools offered extensive support to their educators, such as mentor teachers and ongoing professional development.

Addressing the resource needs of students must also encompass support for their families. As detailed in my findings, these schools provided a significant number of resources for parents to foster their involvement in the school community. Soo Hong (2021) demonstrates that schools that are effective in educating students from low-income backgrounds address resource scarcity by establishing dynamic relationships with parents and the broader community. The schools I studied functioned as resource hubs for families—offering parent centers, computer labs, and

information about low-cost services available to caregivers. However, caregivers were not merely seen as recipients of aid but were also valued as vital resources for the school community. Drawing from Luis Moll's (2005) work on the "funds of knowledge," these educators recognized that material poverty does not equate to an inability to contribute. Caregivers played active roles in mentoring students, teaching lessons about their cultures, working as hall monitors, and organizing school events. Beyond caregivers, the schools also benefited from partnerships with community members and organizations, which provided additional resources and support.

In summary, addressing resource vulnerability requires a deep understanding of context and genuine collaboration between schools, families, and communities. Particularly in urban schools that often lack adequate funding to fulfil student needs, educators must be agentive in seeking out additional resources. After the COVID-19 pandemic, public education saw a significant influx of funding (Farrie & Kim, 2023), much of which was intended to support marginalized students. However, data suggests that this funding has had a limited impact on student achievement (Goldhaber & Falken, 2024). I argue that one reason for the lack of resulting or correlated educational improvement is due to limited meaningful engagement with students, families, and communities in the decision-making process. Addressing resource vulnerabilities requires more than additional funding; it also requires genuine collaboration with key stakeholders to ensure that resources are allocated effectively and appropriately.

## **Recommendations**

This section presents recommendations for K-12 practitioner preparation and educational research. The research findings offer valuable insights into how we can better support Black



students and, consequently, how we should prepare educators serving them. Furthermore, the multi-stakeholder methodological design of this study introduces an innovative approach to generating more robust educational discourse that I believe can serve as a guide for future research.

### *Teacher Training*

In recent years, both traditional and non-traditional teacher training programs across the country have begun to foreground issues of inequity and their impact on student achievement (Pollock et al., 2016). However, there is little evidence that this “new” focus has had any significant impact on teacher practices or student achievement. As detailed in my findings, many teachers are aware of the structural and systemic inequities that affect the academic achievement of marginalized student groups, but evidence suggests that few can identify actionable steps to address these disparities (Mealy & Bennett, 2022). Based on the data collected, I offer several recommendations for adapting and evolving current training methods for pre-service teachers.

### Beliefs About Blackness

This research revealed that teachers who support the academic achievement of Black students have engaged in extensive self-reflection, particularly concerning anti-Blackness. Although recent efforts to dismantle colorblind ideologies in education are commendable, they fail to fully address the unique and deeply rooted challenges Black students face. “Color-brave” approaches, which claim to acknowledge student race, often overlook the structural and historical realities shaping Black students' lived experiences. Anti-Black racism is not merely a matter of bias or prejudice; it is a specific form of dehumanization that systematically denies Black people their full humanity. This dehumanization extends beyond unequal treatment in school—it represents a broader societal and institutional failure to protect and value Black life.

Teacher training programs cannot collapse lessons on anti-Blackness into general courses on social justice practice, but instead should provide a litany of resources to ensure that pre-service teachers have an extensive understanding of anti-Blackness. Moreover, pre-service teachers need comprehensive knowledge and reflective tools to challenge ingrained societal ideas about Blackness that, if unchecked, will impact the way they interact with Black students, caregivers, and coworkers.

Pre-service teachers should be exposed to Black diversity, Black joy, and Black success to help reframe their understanding of Blackness. For instance, during their training, pre-service teachers should have lectures and lessons led by Black students and/or caregivers to shift traditional power dynamics and give them firsthand perspectives on how they can support Black people in their school spaces. With over 80% of teachers in the United States being White and with the scarcity of Black educators in the United States, many teachers may have never had instruction led by a Black person. This is merely one example, but the point I am attempting to convey is that pre-teachers need to see Black people as valued sources of knowledge and wisdom as part of re-shifting their views of Blackness. Teachers cannot construct counternarratives of Blackness to support the academic achievement of Black students, if they have not unpacked their own internal beliefs. Therefore, internal reflection should precede any focus on curriculum and instruction.

It is equally essential for teacher education programs to critically examine their own beliefs about Blackness. As this study demonstrated, the manner in which institutions represent, depict, and engage with Blackness matter. The scarcity of Black teachers in K-12 schools has various explanations, but it is clear that current strategies for recruiting Black educators are insufficient and need to be reimagined. Teacher training programs should critically evaluate their

practices, including whether they have Black educators on their faculty, where and how they recruit candidates, the authors and perspectives represented in the materials students are required to read, and the types of supports they provide for Black teacher candidates to ensure an equitable and inclusive approach to teacher preparation. In this study, both schools had a high percentage of Black educators, which proved to be profoundly impactful. If we want to create more schools that effectively support Black students, it is crucial that we prioritize the training and recruitment of a greater number of Black educators.

### Context Knowledge vs Content Knowledge

Teacher education programs must provide training that assists teachers in effectively delivering culturally responsive content, particularly when they possess limited contextual knowledge. These programs often prioritize a heavy emphasis on content knowledge within teacher education—ensuring that teachers know their instructional subject(s) well—but pay less attention to context knowledge, or how the curriculum relates to the students in teachers’ classrooms. Muhammad (2002) points out that if a school's curriculum is limited to teaching isolated skills (like reading strategies or grammar rules) without addressing the broader context, purpose, and cultural relevance of the materials, even the use of multicultural books will fall short. Furthering this argument beyond an isolated skill focus, I believe that culturally responsive curriculum often falls short of having its intended impact because the teachers leading these lessons are not equipped with the requisite skills to teach the content. As detailed in my dissertation, Redd Elementary School provides students with culturally attuned curriculum, but its effect on Black student achievement and identity formation stems from the way teachers prepare for and deliver that content.

The curriculum's impact is amplified by the skill and contextual knowledge of the teachers who bring it to life. For example, students in one fifth grade classroom at Redd were reading *The Skin I'm In* by Sharon Flake, which addresses colorism's impact on Black girls. The teacher ensured that students understood the content of the story, but also explored the context and engaged in fruitful conversations with her students about colorism in the Black community and its distinct impact on Black girls. I share this example because I believe that we cannot reasonably expect White teachers or male teachers to deliver similarly effective lessons without providing them with resources on colorism, intra-Black community dynamics, and misogynoir. If we are encouraging teachers to provide students with inclusive and identify affirming content, we must ensure they know how to deliver it effectively. Teachers need examples of how to unpack meaning from texts for Black students and other non-dominant student groups before presenting lessons.

Context knowledge goes beyond instruction; it should also influence classroom practices and parental engagement. Instead of entering school spaces with preconceived notions of what Black families need, educators should be equipped with strategies for collaborating with students and their families. As demonstrated in this study, teachers should explore student and caregiver definitions of success and an effective classroom to co-construct norms and policies. Additionally, teachers should actively seek to involve Black caregivers and be provided examples of how to invite these caregivers into the classroom. Greater engagement and collaboration with families will enhance teachers' contextual knowledge, ultimately improving their effectiveness.

### Expectations and Support

Finally, teacher preparation must include an exploration of the relationship between high expectations and strong support particularly for historically disadvantaged student groups. Concepts such as “grit” and “growth mindset” have gained prominence as seemingly universal solutions to help low-income students and students of color overcome academic challenges. They are often promoted as quick fixes for improving student outcomes by focusing on perseverance and self-improvement, rather than addressing the systemic barriers and inequities that disproportionately impact these students’ ability to succeed. So, while educators are in theory holding students to high standards, they sometimes do so in ways that are harmful or pathologizing. The teachers I studied were impactful because they held high expectations for students, but also felt that it was their shared responsibility to ensure students could meet those expectations.

As I have reiterated numerous times, at both sites, teachers’ support for students reflected a communal view of education wherein success was seen not as an individual achievement rooted in concepts like grit or growth mindset, but as a collective effort. Rather than focusing solely on individual perseverance, the educators emphasized that “We can do this together,” fostering a sense of shared responsibility and interdependence. One of the teachers I spoke with at McCune stated that she was taught, “High expectations without support is harassment.” She explained that if teachers hold students to a standard but fail to support them in meeting it, they become part of the problem rather than the solution. Teachers in training must understand that every expectation they have for students and caregivers comes with a shared responsibility to help achieve those goals. I believe this is particularly important for diverse student groups, many of whom come from culturally communal backgrounds (Triandis et al., 1988). Since the majority of our teachers are White and White American culture is historically rooted in individualism

(Jackman, 1996), it is essential to support pre-service teachers in challenging these White supremacist constructs. By adopting more communal orientations in the classroom, teachers can better support the achievement of non-White students whose success is often closely tied to a sense of collective responsibility, cooperation, and interdependence, rather than individual competition and self-reliance.

Pre-service teachers must be provided with concrete examples of effective instruction, especially in classrooms where Black students thrive. It is not enough to tell aspiring teachers what is expected of them; they must see high-quality teaching in action, particularly in settings where Black students are achieving at high levels. Just as we expect teachers to hold high expectations for their students while providing them with the necessary support, pre-service teachers should experience the same from their training programs. They need opportunities to observe and learn from exemplary educators who are successfully teaching Black students. With the technology available today, pre-service teachers should be able to access live or recorded classroom instruction from effective teachers of Black students. As the saying goes, "Teachers cannot be what they cannot see." If we want them to develop into transformative educators, we must expose them to models of excellence and support them in their journey.

### *Leadership training*

Many of the previously detailed ideas for the reimagining of teacher training similarly apply to leader training. However, I also offer leadership-specific recommendations based on the findings of this research.

### Context-Sensitive Leadership

The leaders I studied were impactful because their leadership style and decision-making processes were reflective of the students and communities they served. Similar to teacher education programs, many leadership training programs stress the importance of culturally responsive leadership practice; however, I believe they need to provide explicit guidance on how school leaders can learn about students, caregivers, and the broader community, and subsequently take appropriate actions. The principals at both schools I studied were Black, lived in the communities where they worked, and had children who attended the schools they led. This unique positionality gave them an insider perspective into the broader community's beliefs and values of the people they served. Students and caregiver participants reported that school leaders were often present at community-based events outside of the school setting and hours, allowing them to build genuine relationships. Not all school leaders will have this connection to their school community, therefore they need practical examples of how they can be visibly and meaningfully engaged in the community.

I assert that pre-service leaders should regularly leave traditional classroom settings and be given opportunities to participate in a range of community-based events, with tangible deliverables as their assignments. For instance, future leaders can be tasked with identifying a community event in the neighborhood surrounding a school and once identified, they should be tasked with being participant observers and explore certain concepts with the guidance of the following questions:

1. What are three unique assets you discovered in the community?
2. How are the individuals you interacted with in this community similar to or different from the people in the community you grew up in?
3. How might working in this community broaden your perspective?
4. What role do you think the school should play in this community? Does this align with the perspectives of community members you engaged with?
5. Was your presence at the event beneficial? Why or why not?

This is not an exhaustive list but serves as an example of how school leaders should seek to engage with the community, emphasizing that impactful leaders are visible and engaged community members. Information gathered from these interactions—such as communication styles and community values—should inform leaders' decisions and engagement approaches with students and their families. School leaders should view leading as a multi-stakeholder undertaking and constantly seek opportunities to foster collaboration.

Context-specific leadership training should also support leaders in developing tailored approaches to promote the success of chronically underserved students. Over the past few years, there have been growing attacks on public education, particularly efforts to discourage schools from providing targeted support to historically disadvantaged groups (Johnson & Harper, 2024; Pollock, 2023). Given the increasing complexity of these attacks, school leaders must be trained in how to navigate these challenges while still providing necessary supports for marginalized student groups. The leaders I studied developed practices and policies that, on the surface, were intended to benefit all students but were specifically designed to support Black students. I referred to this as targeted universalism in my findings, and I believe school leaders need to understand the application of this framework in their training. Targeted universalism encourages leaders to adopt universal goals—such as academic success and safety for all students—while recognizing that different student groups may require distinct strategies to achieve those outcomes (Powell, 2008).

For Black students, whose experiences are shaped by intersecting forces of racism, economic disparities, and social exclusion, a one-size-fits-all approach to supporting student achievement often fails to address the specific barriers they face. As Dr. Harper shared in our focus group conversation, we need targeted approaches to support Black students:



We can't just have a set of student success initiatives for everybody and this supposed to benefit everybody. Schools that are more successful and improving the academic achievement and overall wellness of Black students have Black students specific plans and strategies. They're customized. They take an equity approach as opposed to an equality approach. And they give Black students specifically what Black students need, recognizing that those needs are sometimes the same, but oftentimes different than LatinX students or White students, so on and so forth.

While I agree with Dr. Harper's argument, the recent modification of the Black Student Achievement Plan in LAUSD suggests that it is increasingly difficult for schools to employ such strategies (Blume, 2024). School leaders must know how to integrate targeted interventions that support Black student achievement within a broader vision that benefits all students. For instance, if data indicates that Black girls are disproportionately represented in disciplinary actions, it may not be permissible—depending on local context—to allocate funds solely for programs aimed at assisting Black girls in increasing their sense of belonging through mentoring initiatives. However, by directing resources toward students identified as "lacking inclusion" and using data to determine that Black girls are most in need of support, schools can effectively implement programs that primarily benefit Black girls without explicitly labeling them as such. This approach allows for targeted interventions within a universal framework, ensuring that the specific needs of Black girls are addressed while adhering to broader policies or regulations.

#### Protective Environments for Teachers of Color

Lastly, training for future school leaders must explore approaches for recruiting, retaining, and protecting teachers of color. Research consistently demonstrates that Black students benefit academically when taught by Black teachers, who are more likely to understand their cultural backgrounds and harbor asset-based views of Black students (Gershenson et al., 2016). Therefore, if school leaders are committed to supporting the success of Black students, it is imperative that they prioritize the recruitment and retention of Black teachers. However,

research shows that teachers of color, particularly Black teachers, face unique challenges in school environments that lead to burnout, including racial isolation, disproportionate disciplinary expectations, the burden of emotional labor, and frequent exposure to racial microaggressions (Kohli, 2021).

These factors, compounded by systemic inequities and a lack of professional support, contribute to higher turnover rates and shorter career spans for teachers of color in the education system. The school leaders in my study intentionally sought to hire Black staff, because they recognized the benefits to Black students but also ensured they had the necessary supports to ensure their desire to remain in their role. Black teachers at McCune and Redd benefitted from communities of fellow Black educators at their school sites whom they could rely on and seek counsel from, which they reported as an integral factor in their job satisfaction. Additionally, I witnessed Black teachers regularly receive affirmation from school leaders and responsive action when they levied complaints against school practices or personnel. Pre-service leaders should be required to read the works of Travis Bristol and Rita Kohli to explore the unique experiences of teachers of color compared to their White counterparts and to understand strategies for enhancing the wellness of teachers of color.

Aligned with the work of these scholars, the school leaders I studied were intentional about involving Black educators in decision-making processes on campus, ensuring they were seen as more than just disciplinary support, but also as leaders. Moreover, these school leaders supported Black teachers during conflicts with caregivers, ensuring they never felt isolated or under attack. The leaders I studied also previously served the role of being Black teachers, giving them firsthand insights that guided their protection of Black educators. For leaders who do not share this background, it is crucial that they are provided the resources and supports to learn how

they can cultivate protective schools' environments for Black teachers. Pre-service leadership programs should incorporate listening sessions where teachers of color can share detailed accounts of the supports that have acted as protective factors for them, as well as the actions and behaviors school leaders should avoid when working with non-White teachers. The retention of non-White teachers benefit students of all races (Gershenson et al., 2021), and leadership programs must make concerted efforts to meet the needs of non-White educators.

### *Collaborative Education Research*

As previously discussed, the multi-stakeholder design of this research was crucial in providing an expansive examination of not only why these schools were effective with Black students, but also how different stakeholders view the meaning, purpose, and goals of educating Black students. Including the voices of teachers, students, caregivers, and educational leaders revealed the unique ways in which school environments are understood and experienced from different vantage points. I strongly recommend that future educational research adopt similar approaches, breaking down silos in education and creating opportunities for diverse groups—who are often disconnected in research and practice—to engage in meaningful conversations.

One particularly enriching aspect of this study was the focus group interview that included one member from each stakeholder group (teachers, students, caregivers, administrators, and an education researcher). This collaborative structure was essential because it created a space for individuals in these stakeholder groups to be in direct conversation with each other, offering a rare opportunity to deconstruct the traditional separation between stakeholders in educational settings. The session began with vignettes illustrating different concepts of an effective school and definitions of Black student success. These vignettes served as a launching point for discussions, as stakeholders reflected on which ideas aligned with their own

experiences and shared perspectives. The dialogue that followed allowed for a rich exchange of ideas, where participants not only articulated their individual views but also learned from and built upon the insights of others. This multi-stakeholder approach is highly recommended for future research, as it fosters deeper, more holistic understandings of educational environments and encourages the kind of cross-group collaboration necessary for creating schools that meet the needs of non-dominant students.

## **Conclusion**

Black children display brilliance across a wide range of domains, yet schools in the United States consistently fail to recognize, affirm, and provide opportunities for that brilliance to flourish. Public education in this country was not designed with Black students in mind. This dissertation title questions the concept of "good" in education because in the United States, what is considered "good" in schools has often been shaped by White supremacy, creating a standard that benefits White students while undermining the well-being of Black students. Historically, education has meant something different for Black people, and the creation of effective schools for Black students has often occurred in spite of the public education system, not because of it. The path to achievement for Black students, dating back to the Jim Crow era, has been grounded in the principle of "For us, by us." At each of these sites, the improvement in Black student achievement was not initiated by district leaders or new policies but by Black people—particularly Black women—who believed that Black children deserved better. These schools were intentionally designed for Black people, by Black people, and they continue to support Black student success, even as the Black population in Los Angeles dwindles. With Black residents now statistically fewer in number, the unique challenges and needs of these communities are often overlooked, reinforcing the necessity for Black people to advocate for one

another. My research set out to demonstrate that effective educational environments for Black students are not only possible, but necessary.

This study makes clear that Black students do not underperform because of inherent deficits, but because we fail to create school environments that allow them to thrive. Black students across the country suffer in schools steeped in whiteness and White ideologies, staffed with teachers whose biases often go unchecked, filled with curriculum that erases their history, and disconnected from the communities and families they belong to—and then we wonder why Black students struggle. I conclude this dissertation with the hope that this work serves as a powerful, instructive example of the vast possibilities that exist when we create schools that truly center the needs, strengths, and potential of Black students.

## APPENDIX A

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

#### Education Researchers

1. What are 5 key characteristics/attributes you have found amongst successful black students? Why those terms?
  - 1a. In your experience are these attributes of success the same for Black students and non- Black
2. In general, what does it mean for a student to be successful?
3. There is a ton of research on the achievement gap and factors that contribute to the achievement gap between Black students and their peers in K-12 education but in your research/experience, how can educators and schools better address the unique challenges faced by Black students in the classroom?
4. What conditions at school's yield success for Black students? (focus on certain areas discipline policies, school safety, etc)
5. How can school engage parents and communities in promoting the success of Black students in education?
6. How can teacher and school leader training and professional development be improved to better support Black students' academic success?
7. How can policies at the local, state, and federal levels be improved to promote equity and success for Black students in education?
8. What happens in schools where Black students are successful?

#### School Leaders

Write: Think of a student at this school that you would characterize as a success. Without sharing his or her name, **write down 5 words that describe** this student.

1. Can you each share your words describing the student and then share with us WHY you consider this particular student to be successful.
2. Is the successful student you first described a Black student? If so, do you think about the characteristics of a successful Black student differently than you do for other students?
3. Now let me ask you to think of another student at this school who is very different from X [the student first named] who you would also characterize as a success. Why do you describe this second student as a success?
4. We have been talking about a couple particular students who you consider to be successful. I'm curious, as you think about students in your school generally, what does it mean for a child to be successful?
5. What conditions at this school help these students and others be successful?
  - 5a- discipline policies, school safety, etc
6. What role if any does that surrounding community (people & institutions) play in creating this environment of success?
7. Are these ideas of student success visible around the school?

8. As educators we often harbor normative ideas of student success that may differ from students, families, communities. Are there ever conflicts between school-based ideas of success and that of students or caregivers? If so, how is that navigated?

End— Answer the following question in one sentence- What happens in schools where Black students are successful?

## Teachers

Write: Think of a student at this school that you would characterize as a success. Without sharing his or her name, **write down 5 words that describe** this student.

1. Can you each share your words describing the student and then share with us WHY you consider this particular student to be successful.
2. Is the successful student you first described a Black student? If so, do you think about the characteristics of a successful Black student differently than you do for other students?
3. Now let me ask you to think of another student at this school who is very different from X [the student first named] who you would also characterize as a success. Why do you describe this second student as a success?
4. We have been talking about a couple particular students who you consider to be successful. I'm curious, as you think about students in your school generally, what does it mean for a child to be successful?
5. What are conditions in the classrooms that help these students and others be successful?  
5a- participation structure, pedagogical approach, curriculum
6. What learning opportunities do you provide to Black children that enhances student success?
7. Are these ideas of student success embedded in your pedagogy? If so, how?
8. As educators we often harbor normative ideas of student success that may differ from students, families, communities. Are there ever conflicts between your ideas of success and that of students or caregivers?

End—Answer the following question in one sentence- What happens in schools where Black students are successful?

## Caregivers

Write: When you first enrolled your child at BH/KD what were 5 things you hoped they would gain from being at this school?

1. Can you each share your words and then share with us WHY this why important for your student? culture
2. How if at all, does your child's race play into your hopes of what they would gain at this school?
3. We have been talking about the hopes you have for your child's educational experience. I'm curious, as you think about children in general, what does it mean for a child to be successful?
4. One of the things research tells us leads to students success is caregiver involvement. Can you tell me about what KD/BH does to involve caregivers in their child's education?

5. Can you think back to a time your child needed advocacy at this school. What happened and how was it resolved?
6. The principal at KD/BH defined student success as, \_\_\_\_\_. How does that align or diverge with your own thinking?

End—Answer the following question in one sentence- What happens in schools where Black students are successful?

### **Students**

\*Redd and McCune students had separate interview protocol that were each crafted based on student age.

#### *McCune*

1. Write: Please write down 5 common characteristics amongst friends you consider successful at this school
2. Can you all share these words and why you think they are important to success?
3. Is there any difference in common characteristics of success for Black student's vs non Black students?
4. As a student at KD, how do you believe school staff define success? (Is it visible?; how does curriculum if at all contribute to that?)
5. Think of the other schools you attended before KD. From your perspective what conditions/practices at this school are different that contribute to student success?
1. Think of a teacher or staff member on this campus that has made a difference in your educational journey. Who is that person and why have they been instrumental?
2. KD regularly outperform others school on numerous measures of Black student achievement. In your opinion, what does this school do to support Black students that other schools could learn from?

End—Answer the following question in one sentence- What happens in schools where Black students are successful?

#### *Redd*

1. What do you like the most about your school?
2. What do you like the least about your school?
3. What is it like being a Black student at your school?
4. Do you feel like Black students at your school have a different experience than students from other groups like Latino, White, or Asian?
5. How is being a Black student harder than being a student from any of the other groups?
6. What are some of the benefits of being a Black student at your school?
7. How easy it is for Black students to make friends at this school? Why do you think that is?
8. How do you get along with your teachers?
9. Do you think your teachers care about you? Why or why not.
10. Which teacher do you get along with the most? Why?
11. Which teacher do you get along with the least? Why



12. Do you feel like you have more teachers like Teacher A or Teacher B? Why?
13. What are some things at this school that really help you learn better?
14. What are some things at this school that make it hard for you to learn?
15. What do you think would make this a better school for Black students like you?

# APPENDIX B

## OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

### TCSJ IMPACT Observation Rubric Essentials for Teaching: Observation of Practice

1: Create Equitable <b>Community and Culture</b> in the Classroom and Implement Effective Norms and Routines			
Beginning	Emerging	Competent	Successful
<p>The teacher <i>begins</i> to build a <b>community and culture</b> of trusting relationships with students.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The teacher begins to learn about his/her students' intellectual and personal experiences.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher begins to engage students in conversations that demonstrate interest.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher begins to establish a safe environment while promoting student effort and engagement.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The teacher implements a learning environment that elicits students taking leadership opportunities to support one another, respect each other's individual cultures, and resolve student conflicts.</li> </ul>	<p>The teacher <i>works</i> to build a <b>community and culture</b> of trusting relationships with students by implementing a few strategies that establish positive relationships and fosters the development of students' learning.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The teacher knows his/her students' intellectual and some personal experiences.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Norms are established that support discussion and interactions with teacher and students.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> At times, the teacher and students may greet one another in a positive and respectful manner.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher and students occasionally engage in conversations that demonstrate interest in one another.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher occasionally provides supports so that students are able to demonstrate interest in one another's ideas.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher regularly maintains a safe environment while implementing strategies that foster student learning.</li> </ul>	<p>The teacher builds a <b>community and culture</b> of trusting relationships with and among <i>all</i> students by implementing strategies to establish positive, individual relationships that demonstrate care and interest. The students clearly respect and value one another's ideas and ways of thinking.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The teacher understands his/her students' socioeconomic, cultural, linguistic, intellectual, and personal experiences and develops relationships with students.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Norms are established that foster safe and respectful interactions between the teacher and students.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher and students regularly greet one another in a positive and respectful manner.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher and students regularly have conversations that demonstrate interest in one another.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher regularly provides prompts and sentence frames to support students as they demonstrate interest in one another's ideas.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher and students exhibit evidence of positive individual relationships.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> A culture of respect and safety is fostered while strategies are utilized that enable students to learn from one another as well as the teacher.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher occasionally follows-up with students who are having difficulty in class or in personal situations.</li> </ul>	<p>The teacher builds a <b>community and culture</b> of trusting relationships with and among <i>all</i> students by <i>routinely</i> implementing strategies to establish positive, individual relationships that demonstrate care and interest. The students clearly respect and value one another's ideas, ways of thinking and exhibit positive dispositions to learning.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The teacher understands and values his/her students' socioeconomic, cultural, linguistic intellectual, and personal experiences and develops a relationship based on respect and trust with students.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Students take leadership opportunities to support one another and resolve conflicts.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Norms are established and teacher and students hold one another accountable to them. Norms foster safe and respectful interactions between the teacher and students.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher and students greet one another in a positive and respectful manner throughout the day.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher and students engage in conversations that demonstrate care, respect and interest in one another as part of the daily routine.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher consistently models and supports language and behavior that demonstrates care and interest in students and colleagues.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher exhibits evidence of positive individual relationships throughout the classroom community.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher and students consistently demonstrate mutual respect and engage in collaborative learning and positive interactions.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher promotes an age appropriate culture of inquiry and sharing of diverse perspectives to address issues related to race, ethnicity, culture, language, religion, sex, or gender.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher consistently follows-up with students who are having difficulty in class or in personal situations.</li> </ul>

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4: Engage the Community to Advocate for and Meet the Needs of <i>ALL</i> Students			
Beginning	Emerging	Competent	Successful
<p>The teacher begins to engage parents and other caregivers in conversation related to student achievement, behavior and wellbeing at school.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher begins to engage with parents and other caregivers through established school events, systems and activities.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher inconsistently informs parents/caregivers of student achievement.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher inconsistently informs parents/caregivers of students' behavior and well-being.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher begins to develop an awareness of how he can work with others to support his students.</li> </ul>	<p>The teacher engages parents and other caregivers in conversations and activities related to their students' achievement, behavior and wellbeing at school.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Occasionally, the teacher seeks opportunities to engage with parents and other caregivers in an effort to establish relationships of trust.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher informs parents/caregivers of students' achievement and begins to engage them in support strategies.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher informs parents/caregivers of students' behavior and well-being and begins to engage them in support strategies.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher begins to collaborate with colleagues and specialists to provide support for students.</li> </ul>	<p>The teacher engages parents and other caregivers in conversations and activities related to their students' achievement, behavior and wellbeing at school. He/she assists parents in communicating with the school.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher often engages parents and other caregivers in their child's learning.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher designs lessons that allow students to celebrate and share their cultural and family norms.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher informs parents/caregivers of goals for students' achievement.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher shares educational resources with parents/caregivers to support students' achievement.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher engages parents/caregivers in plans for students' behavior and wellbeing.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher shares school events with parents/caregivers.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher maintains open communication with parents/caregivers.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The teacher keeps track of what is happening in students' personal lives so as to be able to respond appropriately.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher regularly collaborates with colleagues and specialists to provide comprehensive support for students and families.</li> </ul>	<p>The teacher engages parents and other caregivers in conversations and activities related to their students' achievement, behavior and wellbeing at school. He/she assists parents in communicating with the school and understanding how to help motivate, engage and accelerate their students' achievement.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher consistently engages parents and other caregivers in their child's learning.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher-parent engagement is not constrained by school hours and on-site locations.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher integrates structures in the classroom that students and families can utilize as they assess their own social-emotional well-being and communicate their need of assistance.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher engages parents and other caregivers in the design of short &amp; long-term goals for students' achievement.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher provides educational resources/strategies with parents/caregivers to support students' achievement.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher regularly informs parents/caregivers of students' behavior and well-being.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher maintains an "open door" policy and actively invites parent/caregiver communication and participation in class/school events/opportunities to support students.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher actively builds partnerships with district personnel and other agencies to provide support services for students and families.</li> </ul>

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