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School System Responses to Racial Injustice

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Executive Summary

Over the past two years, there have been calls for racial justice in nearly every sphere of social and political life, including the field of education. As much of the nation reeled at yet another life violently taken at the hands of a police officer, education workers faced the challenge of responding to local and national demands for policy change at the school and district levels in order to better meet the academic, social emotional, and other personal needs of racially minoritized students. Though much has been written in media accounts on how particular areas met the moment, these stories do not capture the depth of how school systems grappled with issues of racial injustice. In this report, we share data from our 2020-21 study of how schools in eight districts across the United States responded to racial injustice, as well as parents' satisfaction with these responses. Specifically, we ask: *How did school systems in different sectors (i.e. traditional versus charter) respond to heightened attention to racial injustice? How did these different organizational contexts or other conditions shape response? How did parents experience this year of racial reckoning and system responses?*

Across sectors, school systems varied in their responses to racial injustice, ranging from reflection days to curriculum changes to terminating school policing programs. That said, we find that there were more similarities across traditional and charter sectors than there were differences. Three key similarities emerged: 1) There was a continuum of responses, from symbolic to more substantive actions taken by school systems; 2) previous professional learning on concepts of equity mattered for how school systems responded; 3) school systems often took a top-down approach when ideating and implementing racial equity work, with limited input from community members. The primary difference we observed between sectors was that charter schools drew on their autonomy when responding to racial injustice, leading to more within-district variety at the school level in the charter sector than in the traditional public schools. Still, the types and range of responses in the charter sector were similar to what we saw across district sites.

Since sector-type was not a key factor that shaped system responses, we offer possible explanations for the patterns we found. First, district context—particularly geographic, demographic, and political differences—appeared to matter more than sector type for the responses to racial injustice across our sites. Larger, politically liberal areas had a certain degree of fluency with these topics likely due to higher percentages of racially minoritized students, whereas smaller, more conservative districts with higher percentages of White students seemed to have less experience with racial equity conversations. Second, leaders and their orientations toward racial equity work emerged as another explanatory component for why districts responded in the ways they did. Some leaders, primarily those in urban districts, appeared to be more familiar with the importance of equity work due to their district context,

personal experiences, and relevant training, leading them to proactively address racial injustice and inequity prior to 2020. Other district leaders had a more reactive response in 2020, but these reactive approaches varied between cases and still appeared to be shaped by leaders' relative orientations. We complement these first two explanatory conditions with a third theory-driven explanation. We suggest a process of *situated organizational learning* in which school systems are organizations that "learn" how to engage topics of racial equity in ways similar to how individuals generally learn. School systems were situated in—and thus deeply influenced by—their community contexts, which influenced how school systems learned and which actions were deemed an "appropriate" response to issues of racial injustice.

In the final section of the report, we examine parents' preferences and satisfaction regarding school responses to the heightened attention to racial injustice. We find patterns in parent satisfaction along class, political affiliation, school type, and race. Notably, while the majority of parents approved of their school addressing the issue of racial injustice, parents of different races often differed in the types of responses they desired from their schools. White parents in our sample were more content with symbolic school responses, while racially minoritized parents preferred more substantive school responses. Further, three critical themes emerged as salient drivers of (dis)satisfaction: (1) the existence or nonexistence of school responses; (2) the influence of age (in)appropriate content; and (3) emotional and mental health provisions, particularly the importance of healing spaces.

Since school systems in our sample and nationwide continue to engage in efforts to address racial equity for students, and experience highly contested resistance in many places (e.g., anti-"CRT" efforts), we conclude the report by offering suggestions for school systems currently engaged in these efforts and those seeking to begin such efforts. We recommend that education leaders do the following: Consider the material benefit of the policy response for racially minoritized students; invest in meaningful professional development, and consider outside support for students in the meantime; reflect on the ways in which parents' perceptions of school responses can vary based on parents' unique social positionalities; and remain vigilant in addressing issues of interpersonal racism and structural racism.

We anticipate that the findings in this report will assist education practitioners in various stages of their racial equity efforts to consider the implications of their current responses, how the context of their system is shaping their response, and how they might plan next steps in this important work.

INTRODUCTION

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd, an unarmed 46-year-old Black man, was murdered by a White police officer in Minneapolis. Witness videos and accounts indicated that officers pinned Mr. Floyd to the ground and kept a knee on his neck for more than 8 minutes, leaving him unconscious. The murder was not an isolated event and followed a long history of racial violence and police killings, including the recent murders of Breonna Taylor, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and Tamir Rice, to name a few.

Mr. Floyd's murder sparked widespread protests and national attention to issues of racial injustice. The social unrest led to demands for action from public institutions, including schools. In some places, students, educators, and parents called on school systems to combat systemic racism and better address the needs of racially minoritized students (see for example, protests in Oakland, California, Westfield, New Jersey, and Bethesda, Maryland). In many cases, protesters demanded the defunding of school police (see article). Coinciding with a pandemic that was disproportionately affecting racially minoritized communities, these events further elevated attention to issues of structural racism and racial violence.

While much has been written in media accounts (for example, see article) over the past few years, these one-off stories fail to capture the depth of how school systems grappled with issues of racial injustice. Similarly, polls and surveys offer valuable snapshots of collective opinions[1], but they do not delve into multiple stakeholders' perceptions throughout the year, grounded in specific communities and contexts. Collectively, existing media and research fail to provide insights into parents' experiences or the challenges districts faced over time in coming to terms with the demands for greater racial equity, school systems' decision-making processes, and the local conditions shaping actions over time.

How did public schools respond to these events? How did parents experience this year of racial reckoning? Our study, conducted in the first 16 months of the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020 – June 2021), provides some answers to these questions. In March 2020, as part of the National Center for Research on Education Access and Choice (REACH), our research team set out to understand how schools and systems from different sectors (traditional, standalone charter, CMOs, voucher-receiving) were responding in real-time to the unfolding health crisis **[link to other report]**. A few months into our study, following the murder of Mr. Floyd, we expanded the research to investigate responses to the unfolding national reckoning with issues of racial injustice. We asked:

[1] For a summary of polling data on the topic of teaching about racism see article.

1. How did districts/schools of different types/sectors respond to heightened attention to racial injustice, and how do these different organizational contexts shape response?
    a. What were the differences and similarities across sectors/district types in the challenges faced and actions taken?
    b. What conditions contributed to these patterns?
2. How did parents experience this year of racial reckoning and system responses?

Understanding the challenges and opportunities for addressing racial injustice in schools remains as relevant, if not more so, today than it did at the start of our study in March 2020. Throughout the country, efforts to launch anti-racism reforms have faced resistance and come into the crossfire of broader culture wars. Nationally, groups of parents and citizens have sought to end the supposed teaching about Critical Race Theory and racism. One report found that at least 894 districts enrolling 35% of students nationally have experienced anti-"CRT" efforts. These researchers characterized these anti-CRT efforts as a "conflict campaign" with dual purposes of manufacturing conflict to advance political/partisan interests and exploiting real disagreements over how to teach about race and inclusion. Nationally, at least 14 state legislatures have banned the teaching of racism in classrooms (see article).

The experiences of our study participants—including parents and district, school, and community leaders—can help inform these ongoing debates and efforts. The findings presented herein help identify where we saw deep versus surface-level responses and the conditions contributing to these actions. Knowing these patterns along with the perspectives of parents of different racial/ethnic backgrounds, and what they want from their schools, can help shape further thinking and actions around how to address and teach about race and racism in educational contexts.

In the sections below, we first offer a brief overview of the data used in this report and what we learned about how school systems responded to issues of racial injustice. We find that there were more similarities across traditional and charter sectors than there were differences, and that geographic and political contexts were more influential to how school systems responded. We then examine parents' preferences and satisfaction regarding school responses. We find that while the majority of parents approved of their school addressing the issue of racial injustice, parents of different races often differed in the types of responses they desired from their schools. We conclude by offering suggestions for school systems currently engaged in efforts to address racism and those seeking to begin such efforts.

Methodology

Our conceptualization of school systems and school sectors is key to our research design. We define school systems as networks of schools that are joined by a common governing authority. For instance, a traditional school district is considered a school system in that it unites several schools under the jurisdiction of the district organization and school board. Charter schools and charter school networks are also considered school systems when they are linked by a common organization, such as a charter management organization like the KIPP charter network for example.

These school systems can exist across similar and separate sectors. We define school sectors as categories of schools distinct from one another in some of their core operational procedures (e.g., funding, enrollment, governance). The most common sectors are traditional public, charter, and independent. A single city might have traditional public schools, charter schools, and private schools, which belong to these three unique sectors. A school system (e.g., Portland Public Schools) might have schools in multiple sectors, namely traditional and charter sectors. In this report, we focus on the traditional public school sector and the charter sector.

Below we detail our sampling strategy, data collection, and data analysis.

Sample

Our initial sample for this report includes states and districts that participated in research we were conducting as part of the REACH Center at the onset of the pandemic. This research focused on understanding efforts to improve access and equity in school choice policies. At the state level, we selected five sites (Colorado, Florida, Louisiana, Michigan, and Oregon) to represent variation in choice policies and settings, including geography, population, types of choice policies, and the maturity of these policies. All of these states had charter school policies and Louisiana and Florida operated voucher programs that funded students to attend private schools.

Within each state, we then selected a large urban district (Denver, Detroit, New Orleans, and Portland).[2] We also included the District of Columbia (DC), which operates as a hybrid state-district. In this report we treat DC as a district. All of these districts provide important variation in governance structure and choice context. While Portland represents a more typical district with a small number of charter schools, Denver, Detroit and DC have sizeable charter populations, and New Orleans includes only charter schools. Drawing on these sites and data

[2] Florida was also part of our initial sample and participated in state-level interviews, but we were unable to recruit an urban district to participate in our data collection. Some of our other reports do include data from Florida, including a 2021 report on state-level efforts to advance equity in choice policies and a 2021 brief on parent views on the pandemic.

already collected allowed us to formulate a more comprehensive understanding of the context and history of these nested systems.

When the pandemic reached the United States in March 2020 and we pivoted the focus of our research, we decided to add rural districts to our sample to better understand how school systems in the rural context responded to the events of 2020-21. We sought to recruit one rural district in each state, but succeeded in securing participation from two geographically adjacent rural districts in Michigan and one in Oregon. The combined number of districts included in our research and this report totals eight.

Our sample districts converge and diverge along several characteristics. Each urban district has a large student population, ranging from approximately 45,000 to 95,000 students. One rural district had fewer that 5,000 students, and the remaining two rural districts each served fewer than 1,000 students. Each of the urban districts, except Portland, served a majority racially minoritized and low-income student population. Portland was also the only urban district with a traditional district governance structure, along with the three rural districts. The other four urban districts had some form of hybrid choice structure –characterized by some as portfolio management models. Each of the rural districts served a majority White student body, with one rural Michigan district also being majority low income. All of the urban districts were under Democratic mayoral leadership at the time of data collection. Rural districts were mixed, with two having Republican and nonpartisan leadership, and one district being unincorporated. See Table 1 for a detailed description of these sites.

Table 1: District Characteristics (2020-2021 unless otherwise noted)

Districts	Denver[1]	New Orleans[2]	Detroit[3]	Rural MI District 1 (Teal)[4]	Rural MI District 2 (Jade)[5]	Portland[6]	Rural OR District (Sage)[7]	Washington, DC[8]
Total Public School Enrollment	89,061 students	45,037 students	49,001 students	615 students	439 students	46,564 students	4,697 students	94,573 students
Charter Enrollment	20,784 students (23%)	44,190 students (98%)	34,352 students (70%)	71	Not applicable	1,943 students (4%)	3,064 students (65%)	44,229 students (47%)
Student Demographics								
Black-All	14%	79%	82%	.03%	.01%	9%	1%	65%
Black-Charter	17%	79%	80%	.01%		8%	.01%	72%
Latinx-All	53%	9%	14%	18%	16%	17%	9%	19%
Latinx-Charter	60%	9%	12%	.07%		9%	9%	16%
White-All	26%	8%	3%	57%	80%	56%	83%	12%
White-Charter	14%	9%	6%	73%		68%	82%	8%
Low Income-All	62%	85%	83%	60%	45%	54%	41%	75%
Low Income-Charter	71%	85%	90%	42%		18%*	43%*	75%
Students with Disabilities-All	12%	13%	14.0%	16%	7%	16%	13%	17%
Students with Disabilities-Charter	11%*	13%	10%	14%		16%	11%	15%
English Learners-All	31%	6%	11%	8%	6%	15%	<5%	11%
English Learners-Charter	Not Available	7%	13%	< 10 students		<1%	<1%	8%
Mayor	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat	Unincorporated	Nonpartisan	Democrat	Republican	Democrat
Governance Structure	Portfolio Management	Managed market	Fragmented governance	Traditional district governance	Traditional district governance	Traditional district governance	Traditional district governance	Parallel sector governance

[1] District Level Data retrieved from https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdereval/2020-2021pupilmembership; https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/2021charterenrollment; *Percentage of students with disabilities enrolled in Denver charter schools is from 2019-20, retrieved from https://coauthorizers.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Expanding-Access-Improving-Quality-How-Local-Education-Agencies-and-Charter-Schools-Can-Equitably-Provide-High-Quality-School-Choice-Options-to-All-Students-W.pdf

[2] Retrieved from https://www.louisianabelieves.com/resources/library/student-attributes, Oct 2020 Multiple Statistics Total by Site; https://www.louisianabelieves.com/resources/library/special-education-reporting-and-funding, Oct SWD Rates by LEA & Site_PUBLIC; *Private school enrollment is from 2019-20, retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/pss/privateschoolsearch/

[3] MI School Data, 2020-2021 Student Enrollment Report retrieved from https://www.mischooldata.org/student-enrollment-counts-report/; https://www.mischooldata.org/k-12-data-files/

[4] MI School Data, 2020-2021 Student Enrollment Report retrieved from https://www.mischooldata.org/student-enrollment-counts-report/; https://www.mischooldata.org/k-12-data-files/

[5] MI School Data, 2020-2021 Student Enrollment Report retrieved from https://www.mischooldata.org/student-enrollment-counts-report/; https://www.mischooldata.org/k-12-data-files/

[6, 7] Oregon Department of Education, 2020-21 At-A-Glance Profiles retrieved from https://www.ode.state.or.us/data/reportcard/reports.aspx; *Percentage of low income students enrolled in charter schools is from 2018-19, retrieved from https://www.ode.state.or.us/data/reportcard/reports.aspx (data for 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 are unavailable)

[8] Quick Stats: Public Schools in the District of Columbia (2020-2021) retrieved from https://osse.dc.gov/page/data-and-reports-0; 2020-2021 charter school total enrollment retrieved from https://osse.dc.gov/dcschoolreportcard/student-enrollment; 2020-2021 charter school student demographics retrieved from https://dcpcsb.org/student-enrollment; DCPS at a glance-enrollment 2020-2021, retrieved from https://dcps.dc.gov/node/966292; Number of students enrolled in private schools is from OSSE 2018-19, retrieved from https://bit.ly/3Kx21zH

Data Collection and Analysis – District Interviews

Prior to beginning interview recruitment, we tracked districts' websites and social media accounts. Interviews were conducted by members of the research team via Zoom with central office administrators, system leaders/superintendents, school leaders, teachers' union leaders, and community/advocacy leaders between December 2020 and July 2021.[3] Within each district we selected leaders involved in traditional public schools as well as charter schools. To assist with comparisons, we selected only principals from elementary and middle schools, prioritizing schools with high proportions of low-income and racially minoritized students and schools visited in prior years. We also tried to obtain variation in the types of schools (standalone charter, CMO, virtual) selected for leader interviews. Interviews averaged one hour, and all interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Researchers completed a total of 68 interviews (n=6 in DC, n=17 in Denver, n=11 in Detroit, n=12 in New Orleans, n=10 in Portland, n=9 in the Michigan rural districts, and n=3 in the Oregon rural district). Thus, we collected 56 interviews from urban districts and 12 interviews from rural districts. See Table 2.

Table 2: Interviews by Type

Respondent Type	**Number of Interviews (n=68)**
System Leaders (CMO)/Superintendent	10
Central Office Administrators (District/CMO)[a]	22
School Leaders/Principals	18
School Board Members	2
Teachers Union Leaders	5
Community Based Organizations/Advocacy Leaders[b]	9
Public Health	2

[a] Central office administrators included interviewees overseeing academics, operations, enrollment, research & accountability, charter authorization, communications, support & improvement, and equity & diversity, and student health.

[b]Community/advocacy leaders included those from organizations actively supporting school choice options, and broader community-based organizations serving families and children.

[3] Given the challenges wrought by the pandemic particularly on teachers, we chose not to include teachers in our interviews and place additional burden on their already difficult situations.

In order to understand how districts and schools in different sectors responded to the heightened national attention to racial injustice, all participants were asked to what extent this increased attention affected system/district or school-level discussions, practices and/or priorities. They were also asked to what extent their own thinking about race and racism had shifted as a result of this heightened attention.

Interview transcripts were uploaded to Dedoose and coded using an initial list of deductive codes including choice sector (traditional public, charter, private) urbanicity (urban, rural), and student sub-groups (low-income, students of color, English learners, students with disabilities, other). Detailed case memos were created for each state and district utilizing coded transcripts, field notes and information gathered from social media. Team members reviewed transcripts and further coded data for: perceptions of responses to racial injustice; how participants/districts/schools were thinking about racism as it related to their work; attitudes and beliefs about race; acknowledgment of structural inequity/racism and attempts to dismantle those systems; discussion of diversity, equity and inclusion; and perceptions of racialized patterns or disproportionality as related to COVID-19 or other areas (e.g., education, housing, poverty). These coded data were then used to conduct detailed cross-case analyses utilizing memoranda and matrix analyses.

Data Collection and Analysis – Parent Surveys and Interviews

Parent survey. For the larger study we administered (in partnership with CloudResearch) an online opt-in survey to the parents/guardians of school-aged children across the five states (n=3,654 parents). In this report we report on two questions regarding school responses to the calls for racial justice after the murder of Mr. Floyd.

During data collection we applied demographic quotas (by race/ethnicity, school type, income, and educational attainment) to improve the representativeness of the sample. During analysis, we used weights in the full sample analysis to improve how representative our sample is of the overall parent population pooled across the five states (ADD LINK TO ONLINE appendix for detail).

For this report, we rely on summary statistics (averages and percentages), to provide a descriptive picture of educational experiences across our five states. To examine differences by parent subgroups we analyze a pooled sample from all five states (as we did not have large enough numbers of parents in all states to run these fine-grained comparisons within each state). We focus on differences by school type (parents of children in “public” schools, which includes traditional public and charter schools, compared to those in “private” schools, which

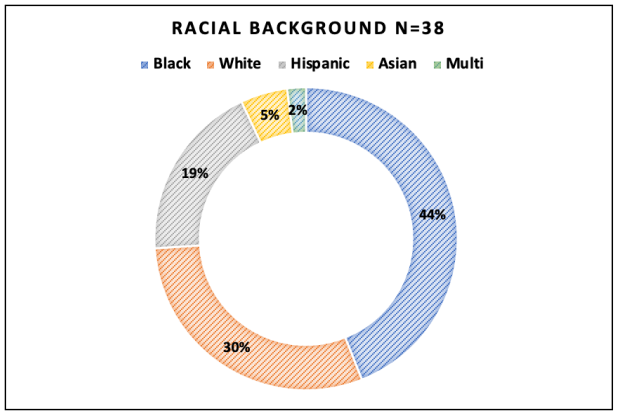
includes parochial and independent private schools), school mode (whether students attended school in person, remote, or hybrid), race/ethnicity, income, school level (elementary versus secondary), and political party. In the figures presented, we indicate differences that are significant at least at the 0.05 level.

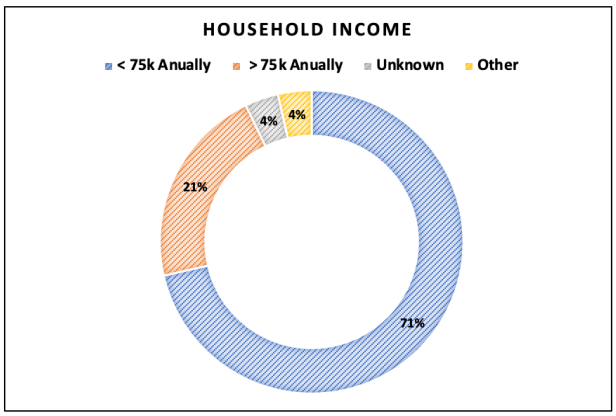
Parent interviews. Our interviews come from a subsample of 38 parents who responded to our online survey. At the end of the survey, each participant was asked to indicate whether they would be willing to participate in a voluntary, anonymous, follow-up telephone interview; if interested, participants were then prompted to provide us with an email address. Among those parents providing us with an email address, we further narrowed the sample along two main criteria—geography and household income. The first criteria—geographic location—allowed us to select parents who lived in the five main urban areas of each state (Denver, Portland, Miami, New Orleans, Detroit) and Washington DC.[4] The second criteria—family income—allowed us to select interested parents from non affluent households (less than 75,000 annually). Given the focus of our broader research on issues of choice, equity, and the effects of the pandemic on historically marginalized students, we believed it was crucial to oversample and focus on this subgroup of parents. From that group we targeted a sample of 10-13 parents per district representing variation in race/ethnicity (keyed to the particular groups prominent in each district), grade level of child (elementary and secondary), and school type (charter, traditional, private, and homeschool).

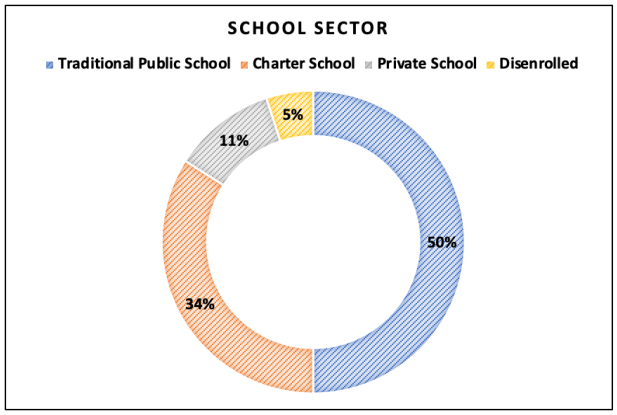
We recruited parents via email and provided $25 Amazon gift cards for their participation. Interviews were conducted via telephone, totaling 1817.75 minutes, lasting an average of 37 minutes per interview (with a range of 19 to 74 minutes). All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Researchers completed a total of 56 interviews, in which, 38 participants were able to expound upon specific reasons as to *why* they felt satisfied or dissatisfied with the school's response to the events following the murder of Mr. Floyd. See Figure 1 for a description of the final interview sample (percentages may add up to more than 100% due to rounding).

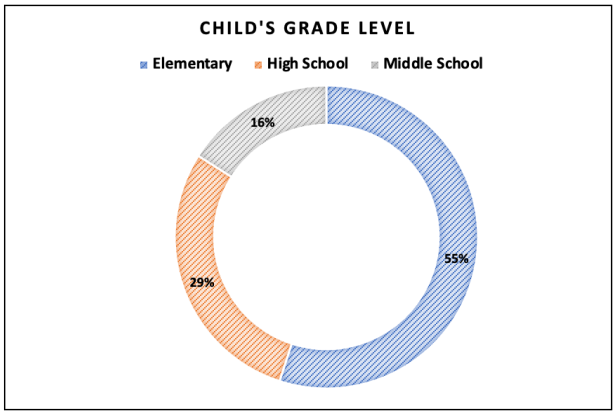
Figure 1: Final Interview Sample by Race, Income, Sector, and Child's Grade Level

[4] DC parents were included in interview analysis primarily because the researchers thought it would be best treated as comparable to the urban districts in our study.









Interview data collection was finalized in late October. Once finalized, interviews were transcribed from audio and cleaned to remove any identifying information. We then inductively produced an in-vivo coding scheme (Miles et al., 2018), which relies on direct language employed by participants, to develop a comprehensive codebook. Consensus on coding definitions was established through weekly team meetings. Once finalized, codes were applied to each interview transcript using line-by-line and holistic coding (Miles et al., 2018). Once coding was completed, companion memos were produced for each site, highlighting emergent patterns related to parents' perceptions of their school's response to increased awareness of racialized violence, following the murder of Mr. Floyd. Using coded data and memo summaries for each site, the team then produced a second memo highlighting emergent themes by participant background demographics (i.e., race and ethnicity, grade level of child, and school type) focused on common themes as it related to parents' (dis)satisfication with their school's response to incidents of racialized injustice.

Limitations

We acknowledge the limitations of large scale data collection processes that fail to make use of community-based research partnership opportunities. Specifically, we recognize that while we were able to identify less privileged families and make attempts to balance our sample in ways

that were equity-driven, our use of Cloud Research's database did not enhance our aims to gather rich insights from those most impacted by racial injustice and its effects on education. Those with limited technology access may not have been accessible via Cloud Researcher's email database; additionally, those most negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which coincided with the onslaught of publicized incidents of racial injustice, may have been too preoccupied with navigating the devastation of the pandemic to be engaged in survey research during the time of data collection.

As such, our subsequent interview sample (curated from our survey respondents) may not fully represent the experiences and/or concerns of guardians most negatively impacted by racial injustice following the murder of Mr. Floyd. And while our case study interviews included community advocates in many districts, we were limited in our ability to capture a wide range of community voices. Future research might consider employing community-based recruitment methods that build on findings from this study.

Lastly, we acknowledge that this study does not attempt to draw causal conclusions regarding the patterns we share and the conditions shaping them; nor do we draw conclusions about the general state of public and charter school sectors writ large. As is common in case study research, the design of this study only allows us to understand the unique experiences of a small sample of traditional public and charter school leaders and parents within our five cases. Future research might comprehensively address patterns of system response and parent satisfaction with school's responses to racial injustices across a broader range of local and state contexts.

FINDINGS

Now we turn to a discussion of our findings. The first portion of the findings emerged from interview data with school system leaders and staff, and focuses on how school systems in our sample responded to issues of racial injustice. The second portion of the findings were drawn from the parent survey and interview data, and centers on parents' satisfaction with their school's responses as well as possible factors shaping their responses.

How did School Systems Respond to Increased Awareness of Racial Injustice

In our case study sites, we investigated patterns emerging across school systems and across sectors to determine notable themes. The following table (Table 3) outlines what we observed regarding how school systems responded to racial injustice across both traditional and charter

sectors. School systems varied in their responses, ranging from reflection days to curriculum changes to terminating school policing programs.

Table 3: School System Responses to Heightened Awareness of Racial Injustice

	Traditional Public School (TPS) Sample	Charter Sample
Detroit (MI)	Detroit had been previously facilitating equity and social justice centered learning opportunities like "Courageous Conversations" and various book studies. District leaders spoke of shifting the focus to structural and systemic solutions; however, it's not clear what, if any, these structural changes have been.	Charter autonomy seemed to allow the charter sector to take a variety of approaches, including professional development, hiring practices focused on recruiting African American teachers, curriculum changes, and the creation of school safe havens from deportation.
Intermediate School District, includes Teal and Jade (MI)	Central office began to engage in professional development to increase understanding and capacity to uncover their own biases. As the superintendent in a neighboring rural district was vocal about supporting BLM, some families left said district.	The charter school set in motion a short-term (3-year) plan for unconscious bias professional learning and developing culturally responsive materials. This is one of the only times any respondent mentioned a specific timeline.
Portland (OR)	Portland's Board of Education passed a resolution in support of the community-inspired Center for Black Student Excellence, and placed a bond measure on the November 2020 ballot that directed $700 million to investments in racially minoritized communities. Also, the superintendent and mayor agreed to terminate the school policing program.	Limited to just two interviews in the charter sector, both participants highlighted the strength in the community during trying times. One school allowed for parents and community members to advertise for BLM marches that took place in the areas around the school during the summer.
Sage (OR)	The district was new to equity conversations and equity work, and the response was limited. They were grappling with which approach was the right approach, since topics could be ill-received by the broader community and staff members.	The charter school took the lead on DEI work in the district and traditional public school leadership opted to learn from how they rolled it out.
Denver (CO)	The Board of Education terminated the district's school policing program. They also passed a Know Justice Know Peace policy which resolved to restructure the district curriculum to be more culturally responsive.	Charter leaders spoke of anti-racist professional development training and holding time of healing and reflection.
D.C.	The district offered social justice training to traditional public schools.	One specific policy intervention was mentioned, the "at-risk preference" for charter school enrollment. This preference was for students who were homeless, received assistance, in foster care or who were a year older for their grade.
New Orleans (LA)	New Orleans Public Schools is an all-charter district, so this section applies to the district system that oversees the charter schools. New Orleans had been engaging in conversations in relation to equity work a few months prior to the summer protests, resulting in an equity audit conducted by a partner organization. The district	School leaders varied in their utilization of high levels of autonomy. Some made substantial changes, while others chose to be reserved in their approaches to addressing inequities. Two charter principals spoke of being reserved because it wasn't the school's or teachers' "place." Others said they will continue to do what is best for their students and focus on their

	also reframed an administrative position to include DEI duties. Community advocates acknowledged the disconnect between these actions and addressing systemic outcomes.	individual school community needs. Regardless of their response, charter leaders emphasized there was little direct guidance from the district level in response to racial injustices.

We turn next to a discussion of salient themes, as we describe the patterns we gleaned from the data in these cases.

More Similarities Than Differences Across Sectors

As illustrated above, school system responses to racial injustice varied considerably. Yet, there were few differences that emerged when comparing our data in the traditional and charter sectors. Though sector-type often dictated who made decisions (e.g., district leader vs. principal) and how resources were distributed (e.g., across many schools vs. within one school), the responses themselves did not vary much by sector.

As we examined trends within and across traditional and charter sectors, three key similarities emerged. First, there was a continuum of responses, from symbolic to more substantive actions taken by school systems. Second, previous professional learning and development on concepts of equity mattered for how school systems responded to racial injustice awareness. Third, school systems often took a top-down approach when ideating and implementing racial equity work, with little input from community members.

The primary difference we observed between sectors was that charter schools drew on their autonomy when responding to racial injustice, leading to more within-district variety at the school level in the charter sector than in the traditional public schools. Still, the types and range of responses in the charter sector were similar to what we saw across district sites.

In the sections that follow, we provide greater detail on the cross-sector similarities and differences, and we highlight cases throughout that exemplify these themes.

Symbolic and Substantive Policy Responses

In both charter and traditional public schools, responses ranged from symbolic actions to substantive policy changes. We define symbolic actions as those that express or represent the value of racial equity and/or racial justice. Symbolic actions take a myriad of forms, including but not limited to public statements, moments of silence, and naming an entity after a prominent racially minoritized figure. We define substantive actions as a policy or operational change with material consequences, intended to improve the experiences and outcomes of

racially minoritized students. Substantive actions can also take a variety of forms, ranging from staffing changes such as hiring School Climate Coaches, to revamping the curriculum to include culturally sustaining[5] content.

We saw examples of symbolic policy responses across sectors. Many traditional and charter schools alike issued statements condemning racist behaviors and affirming the worth of students and individuals broadly of all racial backgrounds. Some also attended or hosted protests and marches. One site, Portland, experienced protest for an extended period of time and was supported by the traditional school district. One district official in Portland reflected on a charter school's involvement with Black Lives Matter protests:

> *One of our schools…which is predominantly White students and White families at that school, had weekly gatherings to meet on the main street right near their school building and participate in the Black Lives Matter protests. And they advertised it every single week to their whole school community. And, they had lots of families and kids show up and be a part of the Black Lives Matter things through the summer.*

Through protest, this charter school community displayed the value of racial equity and justice and likely contributed to the sustained acts of protest throughout the city.

However, a union representative in Detroit expressed reluctance regarding this type of action, particularly if not paired with material changes:

> *[The district] had a march. They had a march. You know? I mean, a lot of people had marches. I don't want to diminish that. As a Black person who has been in Black skin all his life, there have been a lot of marches. Talk to me about changing the system. Talk to me about when you're in a leadership position, how are things different because you are there for people who have been oppressed? That's real change, to me.*

A district leader in Portland expressed a similar sentiment when speaking about the district's recent decision to rename a local school after an influential Black figure, saying "[Changing the name] is fine, we want to facilitate this work, but any name change…must be coupled with deep instructional change and plans for creating a sense of belonging."

[5] Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational researcher*, *41*(3), 93-97.

Actions such as these statements, protests, and marches signal to onlookers—and perhaps the actors themselves—that the participants value racial equity and justice. However, the actions by themselves do not bring about equitable conditions. Tichavakunda (2021) called such actions in higher education settings *university acts of racial redress*, in which institutions use *racial symbols* (Bell, 1992) such as statements, memorials, and official policy stances in attempt to wrestle with their legacies of racism and/or right the wrongs against racially minoritized students. However, these racial symbols are often abstract in nature, making them largely ineffective at improving the material and structural realities of racially minoritized students (Bell, 1992; Tichavakunda, 2021). This extant research aligns with the data from our participant interviews, who often called for more substantive policy changes.

This said, there were also examples of substantive policy responses across sectors. Denver Public Schools and Portland Public Schools both terminated their school resource officer programs soon after the murder of Mr. Floyd and subsequent protests. Both districts stated that the decision was a move toward racial equity in school discipline and safety. One district leader in Denver noted the constraints around substantive racial equity work even in a liberal city, and how the *policy window* (Kingdon, 1984) was appropriate for adopting this type of policy change.

> *I mean, this is the most liberal place I've ever lived in my life, but our liberalism is unchecked…I've been community organizing to end the school to prison pipeline here for 10 years…the policy has to be right, the person has to be right, and the window has to be open.…And I'm okay with saying that. Now, two months later, White affluent parents [are saying], "Are you going to keep us safe? I think this was just a knee-jerk reaction." A 10-year struggle for freedom is never knee-jerk.*

The political constraints surrounding substantive racial equity work necessitated years of persistence by community organizers and district leaders in Denver. This respondent viewed the district's response as a window of opportunity to advance long-held goals, which was in sharp contrast to critiques that the response was impulsive.

In the charter sector specifically, charter leaders—from both standalone and networked schools—also made some material policy commitments. One standalone charter school in rural Michigan committed to a multi-year plan for professional development and culturally responsive curriculum development. One CMO network in Detroit pledged to hire more "African-American teachers and leaders in the building so that [the students] can have an opportunity to interact with someone of color on a daily routine basis."[6] Both district and

[6] Though commitments and pledges might typically be viewed as symbolic, we categorized these as substantive given their material implications (e.g., establishing hiring committees, committing the funds for new staff).

charter leaders opted to implement new policies and adjust operations in an effort to use school and district resources more equitably.

Even still, some actions might straddle the line between symbolic and substantive, in that by themselves the actions do not have material consequence but could if acted upon. For instance, if a district conducts an equity audit, this action alone will not produce material changes in student experiences and outcomes. However, if the district uses the results of the audit to identify areas for improvement (e.g., low retention of teachers of color, disproportionate discipline rates for Black students, or low sense of belonging for Latinx students) and then devotes resources to remedy negative trends, then the equity audit could be viewed as an initial stage in a substantive policy response.

In Portland, a district official reflected on how the prevalence of protests in summer 2020 actually provided a chance to push their district further in their response: "What I love about what's been happening in Portland is that—while we have been protesting and we've been lining up and we're so down for the cause, right?—there has been this great opportunity for us to say, 'But are you really? How performative is this?' " Relatedly, a union representative in Detroit spoke broadly about the importance of leadership being persistent in their efforts in ways that extend beyond reactionary responses to highly publicized instances of racial injustice:

> *There was a response but just like anything, when you want to change a system, you have to be consistent with your response to that. We have to as a society get away from responding to things and get to the point where we're implementing policies and procedures and putting things in place that will extend and survive beyond all of us who sit in these leadership seats.*

This being said, the symbolic-substantive continuum is not a morally linear one, traveling from bad to good. Instead, the value of the action might be better determined by the alignment of what students and communities need and what actions school systems take. Symbolic actions can have meaning and resonate with students and communities, but these actions can also fall flat if this is all the school system offers. On the other end of the continuum, substantive actions can demonstrate real, material commitment to the value of racial equity and/or justice, but these actions can also miss the mark if not implemented well or with community involvement. For example, the same union representative in Detroit who called for substantive policy reforms also saw significance in observing a Muslim holiday:

However, if the schools do not follow through with these commitments, then the actions should be considered symbolic gestures and not substantive.

> *One of the things that we did as a union is for the first time, at least in my history with Detroit Public Schools, we are now observing the Muslim holiday. Many may think, "Well, that's no big deal. Just another day off for kids and staff" but it's bigger than that. It's recognizing a group of people who have felt unseen, felt unheard, felt unrecognized and felt underappreciated and saying as a school community that we see you and we recognize you and you matter.*

In this case, the symbolic gesture of observing a holiday—though it does not alter the material realities of students and families—still holds value in that the policy recognizes and honors the presence of communities who practice the Islamic faith.

In D.C., a charter leader mentioned one substantive policy intervention, the "at-risk preference" for charter school enrollment, which was meant to expand accessibility to high-performing schools. This preference is for students who are homeless, receive financial assistance, are in foster care, or are a year older than their grade-level peers, and the preference increases their chances of matching with a school of their choice in the charter school lottery. While seen as a needed policy intervention, it seemed to respond to issues of racial injustice only tangentially. Racially minoritized students are likely overrepresented in these categories, so perhaps the intervention is viewed as addressing two issues at once, but not all racially minoritized students are at-risk in these ways, and all at-risk students are not racially minoritized. Though it might do more to shift the educational experiences of some students, the policy still raises questions about what is lost when issues of racial justice are subsumed into policy conversations about at-risk student populations.

Lastly, school systems and leaders that made notable efforts to respond to racial injustice frequently met resistance. This resistance sometimes came from parents and sometimes from school staff, and was aimed at both symbolic and substantive efforts. According to a principal in rural Michigan, when the superintendent released an affirming statement regarding Mr. Floyd, the ongoing protests, and Black Lives Matter, the community was mixed in its response including both gratitude and exit from the district. Similarly, a district leader in Portland spoke of the pushback the district received when trying to implement their equity agenda:

> *There's an espoused equity agenda, and yet, when you attempt to make some of those changes that alters status quo, or a shift in power, or breaks down systems of oppression, or when you try to execute an anti-racist agenda—and a simple Google search will reveal how explicit, and outward, and public I am about my anti-racist agenda—you'll see that we end up confronting resistance.*

Notably, these two participants spoke of both symbolic and substantive actions in response to racial injustice, and they both received pushback. Though symbolic actions might be viewed by school system leaders as a type of "soft entry" into racial equity work, this pattern in our data suggests that even soft entry points are likely to receive some opposition.

In sum, across sites, symbolic and substantive actions happened in both the charter and traditional sectors, at the individual school level and the system level. Though symbolic actions were present in a variety of contexts, these types of actions seemed particularly prevalent in schools and systems that were newer to racial equity work, as they tried to increase their capacity to understand the full extent of racial equity issues and potential solutions. Leaders in most of the urban districts appeared to be more aware of the differences between symbolic and substantive actions, and expressed a clear preference for the latter. Later in the report, we discuss the important role of leadership in district responses to racial injustice, as well as how these responses were further shaped by district context and leaders' orientations to racial equity work. Nevertheless, education leaders met resistance to these efforts across contexts.

Next, we turn to the topic of professional development in order to consider how staff learning shaped responses to racial injustice.

Professional Development Mattered

A second theme that emerged across traditional and charter sectors is that equity-oriented professional development mattered for how school systems responded, particularly development that focused on racial inequities and strategies to address them. Though most leaders still faced the challenge of "what to do" and "how to do it," they all agreed that professional learning[7] was an important component. Many school systems, especially in larger urban districts, had already started, prior to 2020, some form of professional development that focused on equity and social justice issues among their district and/or school staff. Other school systems, particularly in rural districts, were newer to these conversations. These learning opportunities took many forms across sites, including book studies, unconscious bias training, equity modules, and social justice training.

Still, the depth and content of the learning shaped the extent of and nature of organizational change that occurred in the wake of Mr. Floyd's murder. Topics across sites ranged from recognizing differences to addressing White privilege. As one charter leader in Detroit noted, "professional development is only as good as the conversations that you're willing to have."

[7] We use "professional learning" and "professional development" interchangeably throughout, and both refer to learning and development on topics related to racial injustice.

Many participants welcomed tough conversations as a necessary road to meaningful and sustained improvement for students. Yet some participants expressed concern about how to present the content in ways that placate the emotions of White participants and onlookers, as shown in Case 2 below.

The districts and schools that had previously been learning about equity work generally or racial equity work specifically—D.C., Denver, Detroit, a rural Michigan district, and Portland—seemed better positioned to respond in tangible ways that shifted the material realities of racially minoritized students, even if slightly. These participants did not view the events of 2020 to be the start of their work in this area, but rather a stimulus for moving the work forward more quickly. A charter authorizer in D.C. spoke of how their approach to racial inequity has shifted from diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work to reevaluating equity and access in their school choice processes:

> *The work has definitely shifted...We've probably been on the DEI journey three years now…George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, all these incidents have led [the board] to start to front and center [these issues]...It just made us look directly at our city, in particular...the areas of town that are further from opportunity, inequities that exist across how money is distributed...So, I know that we're looking at it across what demand means, across what who has access to our great programs and how do we ensure that everyone does have access.*

This participant suggested that their previous "DEI journey" influenced their present willingness to act at the system-level. For the sites that had not previously engaged in professional learning, this possibly meant a lack of capacity or readiness to undertake system-level racial equity efforts (e.g., curriculum, new hires, legislation), or even just to respond to the immediate emotional needs of impacted students and communities. One school in Portland exemplified the challenges that might arise in the absence of prior professional learning, after a racial incident caused the school to reconsider how equipped they were to meet student needs. A district staff member reflected on this incident:

> *[We] worked on how to address this and talk about it...how to hold their students in a way that allowed them to process that [incident]... Because that could be at any school. Sadly, it could happen anywhere. And so, who's ready? What processes do we have in place?*

While equity-oriented professional development will not solve the complex problems of racial injustice, this learning can be a helpful foundation when considering the needs of racially

minoritized students and communities, and when considering meaningful approaches to address racial inequities.

We briefly highlight two cases—Denver and a rural district in Oregon—to show how professional learning, and lack thereof, shaped responses in these two communities.

Case 1: Denver

Denver Public Schools (DPS) is a large urban school district serving approximately 90,000 students across more than 200 schools. The student population is diverse, consisting of 52% Latinx, 25% White, 14% Black, 5% Multiracial, 3% Asian, 0.6% Native Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.5% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. There are 170 languages spoken by students other than English, with 36% of students classified as English Language Learners. The city of Denver is politically liberal and elected a Democratic mayor.

Since October 2019, DPS central office staff had been engaged in The Equity Experience training developed within the district. This training consists of a series of nine self-paced modules to be completed over nine months, covering topics such as color-blind vs. color-brave, implicit bias, the issue of silence, and racial battle fatigue. As the first cohort of participants, the central office staff had nearly completed the training at the time the 2020 protests against racial injustice began. The second cohort started in October 2020 and consisted of school leaders, instructional leadership teams, and student-facing staff at selected schools. The third cohort began in September 2021 and included the same categories as cohort 2, with the addition of any student-facing staff who opted in as well as new central office members. When asked about the district's efforts in the area of racial injustice, one district official noted the importance of The Equity Experience training and reflected on this work with approval:

> *This is one area where I think that DPS has really put their mark on some things…We had to watch these modules…and talk about them as a central team and just embrace, be okay with being uncomfortable about what this means and how you contribute to racism and what you're going to do to be an anti-racist. So we've really embraced that concept... And again…you have to be comfortable with being uncomfortable and really being able to talk about it and [say], "How are we using this information? And what does that mean for you as a leader in your team?" We certainly can be better about it, but you hear us talking about it and you hear us [asking], "Does this promote white supremacist thinking, or does it not promote that?" …So I'm really proud of that work. Again, we have to keep at it. So it's one of our priority areas and I don't think it's going to go away.*

DPS had chosen to prioritize racial equity prior to 2020, which is further evident in the district's decision to make equity a guiding principle as early as 2014 via the "Denver Plan." In January 2020, DPS announced its updated plan for an equity-focused 5-year Denver Plan which would outline the district's equity guidelines and practices more comprehensively. After the initial COVID-19 shutdown measures, the district announced in May 2020 that it would pause the Denver Plan efforts in order to focus on crisis response. Still, equity, particularly racial equity, was prioritized during the early months of crisis response. For instance, DPS drew on parent survey results and delayed opening schools in Fall 2020 partially because they expected this to exacerbate inequities between racially minoritized students who were more likely to do remote learning and their White peers who were more likely to do in-person learning. However, the nationwide protests against racial injustice in summer 2020 brought many racial equity conversations back to the forefront. For example, one district official stated that the district was refocusing on the goals previously outlined in its 2019 Black Excellence Resolution—which focused on academic success for Black students—saying that the equity work had been "ramped up, because of all that happened in our community, in our nation." In this way, Denver participants were not color-evasive as they reflected on district actions; instead, they consistently brought up issues of equity and openly spoke about race in their interviews.

Of particular importance to the theme of professional learning is that the racial equity work in DPS did not need to start in 2020, but rather continued. In this case, the Equity Experience training—and possibly other learning opportunities like it—helped shape how district officials understood the issue of racial injustice and likely shaped how district leaders opted to respond. The DPS school board took several system-level actions in response to racial injustice, including the Know Justice Know Peace resolution focused on revamping the curriculum to honor the perspectives and contributions of racially minoritized communities, and the termination of its school policing program. Though both of these policy actions, especially the latter, were met with challenges, the role of professional learning in shaping policy response should not be understated.

Case 2: Oregon Rural District

Sage School District (pseudonym) is a small rural school district with approximately 1500 students across 6 schools. The student population is predominantly White, consisting of 80% White, 11% Latinx, 5% Multiracial, 2% Black, 1% American Indian or Alaska Native, <1% Asian,

and <1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.[8] There are 13 languages spoken among students in the district. The surrounding city is politically conservative and elected a Republican mayor.

Sage School District was fairly new to widespread conversations on racial equity. In response to heightened awareness of racial injustice, the district created an equity team made up of administrators in order to develop a strategy for becoming more race-conscious in their education efforts. One district official spoke of the need for staff to understand that there are real background differences and that these differences matter for students:

> *Right now [the equity team] it's just a handful of administrators so far. So they're in their pretty early stages. [The role of the equity team is to] make us aware that there are differences and that we need to take those differences into account when we're working with children and understanding where they're coming from, and the families that they're coming from. And just knowing that there are differences.*

Some of these administrators started attending training themselves as a way to learn more about this sphere of work. Though there was a willingness among this team to learn, there was general hesitation about how the training content was framed and communicated, and how this framing might offend the sensibilities of White participants. A district official reflected on her own reservations regarding her professional learning experience on DEI:

> *I have gone to a couple of trainings. I think the approach to training needs to be very carefully done… It just depends on how it is presented [and] received…I have heard from other people that different trainings have also resulted in similar feelings with others… I guess personally I have sometimes felt ashamed of who I am, or that regardless of what I do, there's nothing that I can do that's right…I like the focus to be on what we can do to make the world better for everybody, understanding that there's been disadvantages that people have had, without making people feel bad about who they are.*

Though this participant—and other coworkers—wanted to engage with DEI work in their district, there seemed to be constraints around what types of learning they were open to engaging with. Though it is unclear what portions of the training prompted the bad feelings this participant mentioned, one might assume the content brought up issues of racial privilege, and research has shown that White individuals often respond with dissociation and/or intense emotionality instead of assuming a posture of learning (Diangelo, 2018). These reflections of rural Oregon participants present a notable contrast to the reflections of participants from urban districts, especially one Portland participant who expressed a common sentiment among

[8] Percentages have been adjusted to maintain anonymity.

Portland leadership that "it's time. We cannot, again, coddle White feelings. We need to say what's right is right."

Top Down Orientation Toward Racial Equity Work

A third similarity across traditional and charter school sectors was that policy responses to racial injustice were often enacted by district and school leaders with limited community collaboration, which we refer to as a "top-down" orientation toward racial equity work. Although virtually every participant from every district acknowledged the need to focus on racial injustice in some form, there was relatively little mention of partnering with communities or community advocacy groups as school systems formed their responses to racial injustice.

This top-down approach stands in contrast to more democratic models of decision making, in which a variety of stakeholders including community members have a meaningful role in identifying the issues, deciding potential and ultimate solutions, implementing the response, and providing feedback for how to improve. While leaders may have seen the need to act quickly in the face of escalating protests and pressure, precluding a more participatory process, they may have also cut off opportunities for democratic engagement that research has shown can facilitate buy-in and thus sustainability (Head, 2007; Marsh & Hall, 2018). The top-down approach may have also limited important sources of knowledge to inform responses, as leaders at the district- and system-level do not always have the experiences and knowledge of those closer to the "ground," such as campus leaders and community advocates. For example, school board leaders in Denver explicitly acknowledged the importance of student organizing efforts in prompting and informing the content of the district's Know Justice Know Peace resolution.

In the following cases, we highlight the tensions that arose when districts engaged a top-down response to issues of racial injustice, as well as strategies that created opportunities for enhanced community participation.

Case 1: New Orleans

New Orleans Public Schools is a large urban school district in the south serving approximately 45,000 students across 76 schools. The district's students are predominantly Black (82%), and also includes students who are Latinx (7%), White (7%), Asian (2%), Multiracial (1%), American Indian (0.2%), and Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (0.1%) (NOLA Public Schools, n.d.). New Orleans

has undergone significant education reform post Hurricane Katrina, resulting in a predominately charter district. This history of education reform has garnered national attention, bringing about both praises and strong critiques regarding the impact reforms have had on the predominantly Black students, teachers, and staff (Berkshire, 2015; Harris, 2015; Leonhardt, 2018). New Orleans also has a rich history of community organizing and advocacy around issues of racial equity and justice.

Participants across all administrative levels and sectors of the New Orleans Public School system acknowledged the limitations of initiating and implementing equity work in a decentralized model. Although the superintendent expressed indignation in response to Mr. Floyd and affirmed a commitment to building a school system that "appreciates [Black] life", a decentralized system cannot require schools to take on such work or show support. Similarly, equity work was in progress prior to the recent increase in racial injustice awareness (e.g., renaming of school buildings, designated DEI role changes at district level, equity audits, and examination of practices). However, the interpretation of that equity work varied at different administrative levels, including district level leaders, principals, and community advocates. District leaders viewed prior equity work as progress. One district leader, in particular, noted that "...before Memorial Day and George Floyd, as a school district, actually in the month of February before we even got into knowing that we'd be responding to COVID, we started a journey looking at racial equity and diversity [and] inclusion."

Still, many community advocates and principals in New Orleans viewed these efforts as performative and inadequate. One advocate asserted that the pandemic "reveals, in sharp relief, the inequities that already exist." This participant went on to say, "I feel like it really pushed it in their [institutions] face like, 'No. You guys really aren't doing anything substantive to really address these issues.'" Compared to district staff, community advocates were most aware of the impact of systemic inequities, reported the most actionable practices, engaged in deeper conversation around inequities, and focused on supporting families directly impacted by exacerbated inequities. For instance, one organization directly assisted families by helping them "apply for their unemployment…and also pressed our elected officials in passing policy that's fair and just, to really ensure that safety and social welfare net for all families that's impacted because nobody expected this." Yet, district administration did not mention community advocates as key decisionmakers.

The superintendent ultimately announced a partnership with a community organization to complete an equity audit to better understand the district's inequities. Yet, the actions taken by the district leadership team still were perceived as inadequate and disconnected from the realities being faced by those on the ground. As an example, one community advocate

referenced the inequities exacerbated by the pandemic, stating that the district and schools of choice were "forced… to admit that [schools] are a part of the community, and [schools] cannot, on a grand scale, impact children of New Orleans without addressing the needs of the communities that they come from." This respondent cited the digital divide as evidence for needing a community-oriented, ground-up approach, since residents voted in favor of addressing this issue when they supported the current mayor's election platform. That said, many school leaders continued to carry out equity work as they deemed necessary for their buildings, and community advocates continued to execute agendas and measures to address inequities at a local level while calling for the structural change they considered to be the only way to sustain long term equitable outcomes.

At the time of our study, principals and community advocates felt little, if any, trickle down change of district level work. Instead, principals and CMO leaders spoke of using their autonomy to address inequities and change practices within their own buildings through curriculum, social emotional learning policies, and supporting individual families as needed. As one community advocate stated, "When you have a community that doesn't have the essential necessities of just having a quality education, a robust healthcare system, an adequate economy where people can make a living wage, you're really creating an environment where there's going to be a lot of despair." Both the lack of trickle down changes and limited involvement of principals and local community advocates left many respondents questioning the district's commitment to equity. One charter principal stated, "I know equity is a big thing that's out there and people claim, but again, for me, it's just another word that people use until I see practice, until I see leadership who are making changes."

Case 2: Michigan Rural District

Teal School District and Jade School District (pseudonyms) are a part of a larger Intermediate School District (ISD) in northwestern Michigan. This ISD is the regional governing board that oversees five counties and more than a dozen school districts. ISDs in Michigan were created to provide a connection between local school districts and the Michigan Department of Education. Both rural school districts were part of the same county within the larger ISD. In terms of racial demographics, Teal is a more racially diverse district than Jade, with about a quarter of the students identifying as either Native American, Latinx, Asian, or multiracial. Over 90% of the students enrolled in the Jade School District are White. The racial demographics of the students in the two school districts are important factors when considering how racial injustice and inequity manifested in the two contexts. Jade responded in 2020 with a largely top-down approach, while Teal responded with more of a community participatory approach after a history of ineffective top-down efforts.

In Jade, though the district was new to district-level racial equity work, leaders began to consider how they might respond to the national calls to action. While the school and district leadership were aligned with their responses to racial injustice and inequity, some members of the community were not in agreement with their stance. The recently-hired superintendent sent a letter to parents concerning the murder of Mr. Floyd and Black Lives Matter protests that were occurring around the area. After the letter was released, a local principal received pushback from some parents concerning the district's response to racial injustice. The principal commented,

> *[The letter] landed in one of two ways: either people were really appreciative and grateful and so happy that the school was providing support and direction and communication about it, or they weren't. The people who were unhappy, some of those families that we lost I think was as a result of that letter. Some people really ... really took offense to the fact that our superintendent suggested joining or checking out a local Black Lives Matter chapter. They felt that that was very political, and they were really angry.*

Some parents disenrolled their children from the school after the letter was posted. This disparity between district leadership response and community members' positions could be an example of leaders feeling pressure to act quickly without engaging in democratic efforts that could have fostered buy-in from parents. However, this case also illustrates the tensions that can arise when communities are sharply divided on how (or if) to approach racial equity work at the school system level, and shows the complexity of being responsive to community voice. Issues of power, racism, and oppression are often perpetuated at both the system-level and at the community level, which raises questions as to whether equity-oriented leaders might utilize top-down response strategies as a way to advance equity efforts that otherwise might not gain traction from the community.

In Teal, racial inequity primarily concerned the inequity between Native American students and White students in the district. Multiple individuals from the school district and charter school mentioned the lack of trust that the Native American community had in the local school district. The mistrust was not recent, as it had persisted for generations. Nevertheless, the school district and charter schools made concerted efforts to rebuild trust by prioritizing the needs of members of the tribal community. The superintendent explained,

> *Probably the biggest challenge is lack of trust. I can probably write a master's thesis on what lack of trust does in the community, especially in a small rural community. And indigenous populations are not unlike other populations around the country. I mean, whether it's an urban area or a rural area, when you have a lack of trust between any*

> *group and a governing body, or in our case a service-providing body, it's going to be a struggle. And we struggle with that… What has worked, is we say what we do and do what we say. And we did that early, often and repeatedly.*

Cognizant of this history, the principal of the charter school made efforts to work with families from the reservation to better understand their perspectives when racial violence was highlighted after the murder of Mr. Floyd. The principal offered,

> *We invited a native mom to come and tell us some stories about the trauma that is generational and of her ancestors, in the recent past. And it was a very moving experience…We can never un-know that… We can recognize [that] this is part of what it might feel like to walk in their shoes of having harm and having been treated poorly.*

Efforts such as these were in part facilitated by the district's liaison between the schools and the Native American community. Prior to the events of 2020, including the pandemic, the superintendent established this position for someone from the reservation and Native American community as a way to better incorporate this community's perspectives and respond to some of their needs. The community liaison reflected on the duties of the role and the importance of naming and addressing racial injustice when working to serve the local Native American community:

> *I work specifically with our superintendent and our district principals to create and formulate a productive system to help aid that disparity. In addition, we provide that social work aspect as well, too. A lot of our students are experiencing a lot of generational trauma, a lot of historical trauma. The oppression that is still widely known within the reservation is real. A lot of people really don't take into consideration that reservations were built for that specific reason …to create that oppression and to create that destructive force for Native Americans. I tread lightly using the word extinction. But in reality, that was what reservations was [sic] built to do, was to extinct a lot of the population there.*

In addition to these efforts, both the charter school and traditional public school in Teal engaged teachers and staff in training for culturally responsive pedagogy and unconscious bias. The Title VI officer at Teal noted that some of the staff were not as enthusiastic about the trainings as they were about others, but the principal at the charter school planned to continue the trainings going forward, and to redesign their school library using Anti-Bias/Anti-Racism rubric as a guide.

Though the two rural districts studied in Michigan are close geographically, they are quite far apart in terms of how the school systems viewed and responded to issues of racial justice and equity. Education leaders and community members in the first district, which is racially

homogenous, had not been forced to consider racial justice and equity until recently, leading to tension between school system leaders and the predominately White residents. In this district, a top-down approach seemed useful for responding swiftly to issues of injustice, yet the community buy-in was mixed. Community members in the second district, in which there was a longstanding mistrust between Native American residents and White residents, have been in search of peaceful ways of engaging for some time and began to see improvements after meaningfully engaging the Native American community's perspectives.

In a later section, we will discuss the factors shaping the cross-sector patterns we have reviewed so far—namely, a top-down orientation to racial equity work, the salience of professional learning, and the symbolic-substantive continuum of school system responses. In what follows, we briefly highlight two cross sector differences that emerged from our data.

Cross-Sector Differences

Even in the presence of many cross-sector similarities, we observed a couple of notable differences in how traditional public and charter school systems responded to issues of racial injustice. Based on the data we collected, we find that differences centered around systems of autonomy and centralization.

Autonomy Mattered

The primary difference we observed in how schools and systems responded across sectors had to do with the discretion leaders had. Traditional public schools within a single district seemed to respond primarily in ways consistent with district decision making (e.g. district-wide training, rethinking discipline and safety in the absence of school police), whereas charter school leaders appeared to have more latitude to carry out a variety of school-level policy responses independent of district approval. This autonomy in the charter sector means there was more within-district variation in school responses in that sector. In Detroit for example, a number of charters made a range of commitments regarding racial equity. One Detroit CMO leader stated that its school system pledged to hire more African-American teachers and school leaders so that students can "have an opportunity to interact with someone of color on a daily routine basis." Similarly, a principal of a Detroit standalone charter school committed to integrate more diverse perspectives in its curriculum, saying, "We have made some intentional shifts in different material that we put before our scholars, not only that, but just the level of conversation that we have with them even down to kindergarten." The Detroit TPS principals in our sample did not mention making such changes at the school level.

Across charter types (CMO, standalone) and district contexts (portfolio model, all-charter

district, urban, rural), charter schools responded to racial injustice in ways that were parallel to—but not necessarily in tandem with—their respective districts. In D.C. for example, a charter authorizer noted that their charter board was in the third year of their "DEI journey," but that the focus on racial equity recently intensified partially due to the aftermath of the 2020 protests, leading them to interrogate the accessibility and equitability of their school choice enrollment systems. Meanwhile, the district offered social justice programming to DCPS parents to learn more about topics such as anti-racism. Though both sectors were advancing efforts centered on racial equity and justice, the efforts themselves varied.

Still, the type and range of responses we observed in charter sectors across sites were similar to the responses in the traditional sectors across sites. That is, similar symbolic and structural responses were present in both sectors—from protests, to professional learning, to restructuring police partnerships. Overall, autonomy mattered for what changes took place at the school level; yet, neither the traditional sector nor the charter sector in our sample displayed a noticeable slant toward a type of response.

Little Collaboration Across Sectors

In addition to differences in autonomy, there were also differences that stemmed from the governance structure of the school systems. Though charter schools were certainly a part of their districts, there was limited collaboration between traditional districts and charter systems in most of our case sites. This independence was likely shaped by the reality that charters are independently-run organizations, lessening the need for districts and charters to fully align. Compared to the cross-sector collaboration we observed in the early stages of the pandemic response (XX **add link to COVID response report here**), there was relatively little teamwork when deciding how to respond to racial injustice and implementing those responses.

In D.C. and Denver for instance, charter leaders did not seem to feel fully included or informed on district racial justice efforts. In D.C., as mentioned above, the district offered social justice programming for district parents that charters did not readily have access to. An authorizer expressed a desire for charter communities to take part, saying, "DCPS was doing things like racial social justice…classes and programming that was offered to families. I was like, 'Oh, my God, that was so cool. I wish we could take part in that.'" In Denver, there seemed to be a gap in communication and direction regarding how two districtwide racial equity initiatives—the Black Excellence Plan (in place prior to 2020 protests) and Know Justice Know Peace—applied to charters. One district leader in Denver acknowledged that cross-sector collaboration required some negotiation, which took time, and that additional collaboration was needed:

> *We [the district] are trying to figure out how [Know Justice Know Peace] applies to charters…because they don't have our same curriculum. They don't have to use it and they don't. But it was intentionally written across our family of schools. So just like two years ago we passed a Black Excellence resolution saying we need to centralize the experience of black students…we put together a working group to say, "...How are charters going to implement it," and then develop some agreements…We're going to do the same thing with this Know Justice Know Peace Resolution. You don't have to use our curriculum, but how can we ensure that your curriculum is also culturally sustaining and centralizing the experiences of people of color?*

Though charter sector leaders were not part of the initial decision making process regarding these racial equity policies, the district did make efforts to include charter leaders in conversations regarding implementation across sectors.

One exception to this lack of collaboration was the rural Oregon district. In this district, the charter school took the lead on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) work. District leadership opted to learn from how the charter school implemented their programming efforts, saying "[The charter is] a step or two ahead of us, so we're watching carefully how they roll it out." Many would say this type of learning and collaboration between district and charter is an example of an ideal charter model in which the charter has the flexibility and autonomy to innovate and the district learns from those innovations[9]. This district was also likely in more of a position to want input from its charter school given that the district and surrounding community was very new to addressing racial injustice.

What Explains These Patterns?

In this section, we briefly put forward possible explanations for the patterns we have outlined thus far. First, district context—that is, geographic, demographic, and political differences—appeared to matter more than sector type for the responses to racial injustice across our sites. Larger, politically liberal areas had a certain degree of fluency with these topics, whereas smaller, more conservative districts seemed to have less experience with racial equity conversations. Larger urban districts in our sample also had higher percentages of racially minoritized students and residents than the smaller rural districts, suggesting that the urban districts may have been compelled to address issues of racial equity sooner. Second, leaders and their orientations toward racial equity work emerged as another explanatory component for why districts responded in the ways they did. We discuss these two conditions, after which

[9] This model was part of the initial vision and intention of charter school policy, put forth by the late Albert Shanker, former president of the American Federation of Teachers (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014).

we draw on organizational theory to put forth a theoretical lens that helps to further explain these patterns.

District Context Might Matter More Than Sector

The starkest differences we observed in responses were between urban and rural contexts, which in our case sites overlapped with liberal and conservative political differences, as well as differences in racial demographics. These district characteristics shaped the variation in responses mentioned earlier, particularly a district's experience with professional learning and a district's inclination to respond in symbolic or structural ways. School systems in diverse, politically liberal, urban sites—such as Denver, Portland, and Detroit—tended to have prior training with equity-related content and were more prone to structural responses, while school systems in whiter, politically conservative, rural sites—namely, Sage and Jade—needed to build the infrastructure for professional development and responded more symbolically. That said, the level of recognition of deep-rooted systems of inequities seemed to reflect the local demographic and political context. Their fluency with these issues was reflected in their pre-2020 actions, as well as the actions a district was willing or "ready" to take in response to calls for change in 2020.

Detroit nicely illustrates the ways in which local geographic-demographic-political context appeared to shape response to racial injustice in 2020-21. District and traditional school leaders in Detroit had been engaged in social justice training and relevant book studies for about two years prior to the summer 2020 protests. The Detroit respondents across sectors were comfortable speaking on issues of racial injustice and were poised to respond in material ways. A charter school leader acknowledged the prevalence of white supremacy in education practices and the impact of these oppressive racist norms, saying, "[We treat] white supremacist norms and values like the value of the written word. 'It is what it is.' And that's not the type of space we want to have…This has forced us to [acknowledge] we still don't have every 'T' crossed and 'I' dotted. So we have to figure those things out." District leaders also acknowledged racism, and two high-level district leaders spoke of shifting the focus to structural policy solutions. The respondents conveyed a sense of readiness to act on their awareness of racial injustice, as well as a distaste for symbolic or—as one respondent stated—"performative" actions. Detroit's urban, predominantly Black, and liberal context appeared to help shape this response from school systems and their leadership—leading to a common appetite for structural responses across sectors.

By comparison, in the rural Oregon district we studied, the region's conservative political context appeared to shape the fluency and responses of the traditional district. According to respondents, the political climate of the surrounding community made it challenging for the district to address issues of racism and injustice. Consequently, the district was new to wide-scale engagement with racial justice topics. One district official in rural Oregon spoke of a new state policy (Every Student Belongs) that banned particular symbols often associated with hate crimes and noted that this was a wake-up call for the district to engage in equity work: *"There was a [state] policy where we can't use swastikas, or lynches, or Confederate flags. There was a big list of things that we need to make sure are not in schools. So that's the launching pad that we use for knowing that we needed to do some work around equity."* Though some district leaders recognized that this state policy was a window into deep issues of injustice, they remained careful in how they engaged issues of racial injustice so that "it [would] be positively received." Likewise, a district leader reflected in depth on the instinct to proceed slowly and cautiously:

> *Actually last spring we had a Black Lives Matter protest. Some of our, I guess you'd say, more liberal folks were protesting downtown in support. And we had one of our contract employees say, 'If they do that again, I'm going to drive my truck right through them, yada, yada, yada' online. And so we fired her. We had the contract to fire that particular individual, but she expressed something that's not particularly uncommon around here. And so in that political context, [paired with] Every Student Belongs [the ODE's guidance for creating safe and inclusive school climates], it's going to be really hard for us to have that conversation because essentially my moderate, my Caucasian families, board members even, they don't see. [They say,] 'Oh, we treat everybody the same.' They don't see or recognize the institutionalized problems that we have within law enforcement… they categorize it as something else. And so we've got a lot of work to do in a challenging environment. It's just challenging to know that you've got to watch what you say very carefully, if you want to be seen as part of the group. And so I'm couching it more along those lines of, 'We need to make sure every student feels welcome to be here.'*

In this case, the leader's reflections exemplified the interrelatedness of politics, geography ("around here"), and targeted racial violence, and particularly how this context influenced the range of responses deemed suitable by district leadership. The Oregon rural district did not take substantive policy action, nor did leadership seem eager to. Instead, leadership observed a need for professional learning and possibly community engagement on topics of race and equity.

Though most of the school systems in our sample aligned with this geographic-demographic-political explanation, two cases deviated from these explanatory conditions. New Orleans was an outlier among urban school systems in our sample in that they had reported to only recently have started discussing racial equity at the district level just before the onset of the pandemic, whereas the other urban districts (Denver, Detroit, Portland) had been having conversations at the district level for at least a year prior to the pandemic. This later entry into racial conversations is perhaps shaped by the city's location in a strongly conservative state, and by the district's recent history of transforming to an all-charter district that has to build back its capacity to operate once again with an elected school board. Another outlier was one rural Michigan district mentioned earlier, Teal, that devoted extra resources and support for Native American students during the pandemic and involved the Native American community in the decision making processes. Teal's deviation from its rural counterparts seems to stem from its sizable population of Native residents, and from district leaderships' decision to adapt to the needs of its community, which we discuss further below. Still, overall we observed clear differences by district contexts.

In sum, both rural and urban districts seemed to face the challenges of what to do and how to do it, and they all agreed that addressing racial equity was important. However, their proficiency in this area, along with what they perceived as the most pressing challenges in implementing change, differed greatly. Rural district leaders seemed more concerned with palatability, while urban district leaders seemed more concerned with scope and impact. While such differences, as shown above, were influenced by district context, leaders' preferences for palatability versus impact were also influenced by how leadership oriented themselves toward racial equity work.

Leadership

A second component that shaped school systems' responses to racial injustice in our sample was local leadership and their relative positions toward racial equity work. There was variation in how leaders responded throughout our cases. Some leaders, primarily those in urban districts, chose to proactively address racial injustice by incorporating programs that addressed anti-bias trainings and racial inequity prior to 2020. For example, a district leader in Denver said "We already had equity as our primary focus as a district. I don't think that [the summer of racial reckoning] changed that." Similarly, a district leader in Detroit noted, "We already invested in equity work before the height of the George Floyd incident and [had been] doing training on whiteness and White privilege. We were doing all of that about a year before George Floyd." Leaders in Portland stated that the work that they had been doing prior to 2020

and throughout always had an “equity lens” applied, but they also individually were very supportive of their Black Lives Matter movement and protests that occurred. In these cases, leaders were perhaps more familiar with the importance of equity work due to their district context, personal experiences, and relevant training, such as the Portland leader saying the district could not again afford to “coddle White feelings.” In other words, their orientations toward racial equity work shaped the responses that they pushed for in the district.

Other district leaders had a more reactive response in 2020, but these reactive approaches varied between cases and still appeared to be shaped by leaders’ relative orientations. Sage School District in Oregon and Teal School District in Michigan carried out different strategies to address the murder of Mr. Floyd even though both districts’ populations are majority White and politically conservative. In Sage, the district superintendent was hesitant to address racial injustice because they thought that it would not be received well by the conservative community. In contrast, the superintendent of Teal immediately sent out a letter stating their support of the Black Lives Matter movement.

The Teal leader in Michigan took more risks and acted in a way to try to influence the community’s beliefs, while the Sage leader in Oregon let the political lean of the community dictate their response. As with the urban districts mentioned above, Teal leaders’ orientations toward racial equity work were likely shaped by the district demographic context and their previous experiences working with the local Native American community. The Native Title VI officer commented on the importance of district leadership’s willingness to learn and evolve:

> *I try to give that trauma-informed piece of knowledge to the best of my ability when our administrative team comes together. Our new superintendent is very active with the diversity in our schools and understanding the importance…[The superintendent] added me to this administrative team and we sat there and discussed our real issues, and we figured out how to solve them. And having a voice at that table is pretty significant.*

This district leader stressed the importance of critical awareness and support from head district leaders. In 2020, when confronted with pushback and even disenrollment, the Teal leader still held community forums to encourage a dialogue about racial injustice and the Black Lives Matter movement so that community members could discuss their reservations and possibly even be a part of the efforts.

To reiterate, we have detailed two components that shaped the patterns in school systems’ responses to racial injustice. First, regardless of sector type, school systems in large politically

liberal cities tend to have greater experience with professional learning, which appeared to better position these school systems for structural policy responses to racial injustice. School systems in smaller politically conservative cities often had less experience with topics of racial equity and responded more symbolically. Second, as perhaps a natural complement to geographic and political differences, our data point to the importance of district and school leadership in driving the patterns we observed across our study sites.

To consider why this might be, we briefly suggest a process of situated organizational learning in which school systems are organizations that "learn" how to engage topics of racial equity in ways similar to how individuals generally learn. Further, as we have discussed, school systems are situated in—and thus deeply influenced by—their community contexts, which influence how school systems learn.

Situated Organizational Learning

When responding to issues of racial injustice, school systems experienced pressures to act, particularly in the form of policy change. Oaks (1992) theorized three dimensions of policy change: technical, normative, and political. Technical policy change has to do with the logistical structures and procedures. Normative changes deal with altering people's attitudes and belief systems. Political dimensions of policy change involve aligning stakeholders and community members, as well as navigating power dynamics. Applied to racial justice, one might categorize required anti-bias training as a technical change, educators recognizing that biases are inherent and harmful as normative change, and mobilizing support for race-conscious change among teachers, leaders, and parents as a political change.

According to researchers, the technical dimensions of policy change are important, but still insufficient without the normative and political dimensions, which are largely influenced by macro societal narratives even at the local level (Oaks et al., 2005). Taken together, school systems seeking to enact policy change are constrained not only by the technical considerations of policy change, but also normative and political considerations, creating a "zone of normative and political mediation" in which a school system reforms its policy and practice (Oaks et al., 2005, p. 288). As we saw in our cases, a school system's *situated* context (i.e., geographic, demographic, and political environment) shaped the boundaries for what was deemed an appropriate response to issues of racial injustice.

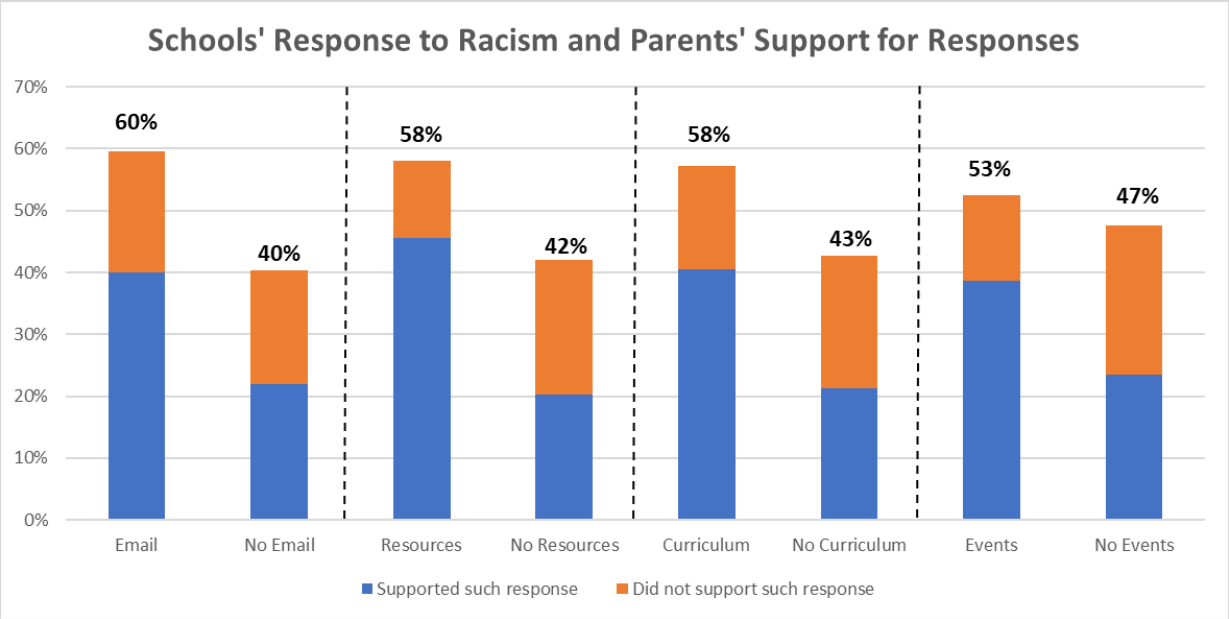
How Satisfied Were Parents With Their School's Response?

In this report section, we turn our attention to parent preferences and satisfaction regarding schools' responses to the murder of Mr. Floyd and issues of racial injustice. Parent perspectives can lend insight into the types of community feedback that school systems were navigating in the early response period, as well as help shape ongoing efforts at the system and school levels to address issues of racial injustice. To understand parents' experiences, we draw on both survey and interview data. We find patterns in parent satisfaction based on class, political affiliation, school type, and race. Notably, while the majority of parents approved of their school addressing the issue of racial injustice, parents of different races often differed in the types of responses they desired from their schools. White parents in our sample were more content with symbolic school responses, while racially minoritized parents—especially Black parents—preferred more substantive school responses. Relatedly, racially minoritized parents were more likely to expect their child's school to serve as a resource for learning about topics of injustice, whereas White parents were more likely to suggest it was not a school's place to deeply address these topics. We provide a more comprehensive description of these findings from the parent data below.

As noted in the methods section at the start of this report, in 2021 we surveyed parents across five states. A set of questions on the survey addressed how parents experienced schools' racial injustice responses after the death of Mr. Floyd in the summer of 2020. The survey provides three key findings.

First, we asked parents how their children's school responded to Mr. Floyd's death and Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020 (see Figure 2). In terms of how schools responded, a little over half of the parents reported schools sent an email or letter to parents discussing racism, bias, diversity, or inclusion (60%). According to more than half of parents, schools also responded by providing resources for how parents can talk to their children about racism, bias, diversity, or inclusion (58%), creating curricula to teach students about these issues in class (57%), and holding forums/events for the school community to talk about these issues (52%). Here, we saw patterns in the data along the lines of racial demographics, family income, school sector, and political affiliation. Parents of Asian and Hispanic descent, along with affluent parents, and those who identified as a Democrat were more likely to report that their schools addressed racism in the previously mentioned ways.

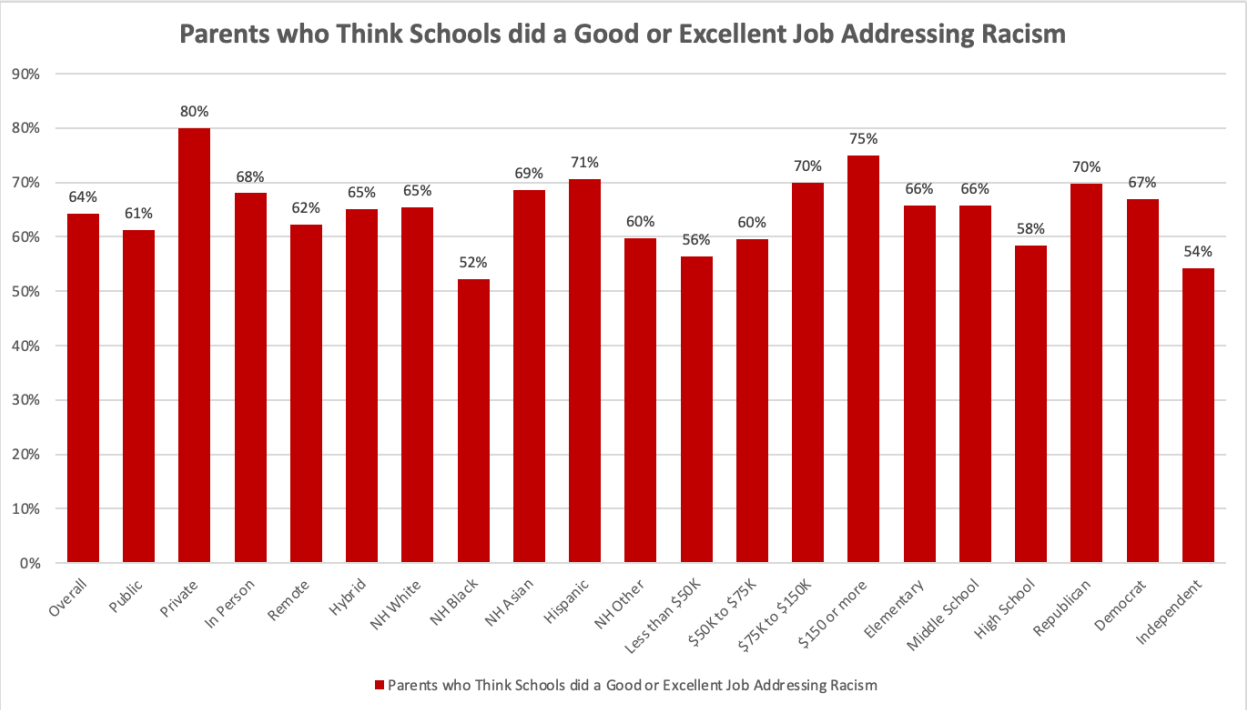
Figure 2: Schools' Response to Racism and Parents' Support



The survey question also asked if parents supported these school responses. In other words, if the school took the action, were they glad (supported – in blue) or did they wish the school had not taken the action (did not support – in orange)? And if the school did *not* take the action, were they glad (supported) or did they wish the school had taken the action (did not support)? One can see in Figure 2, that in schools reported to take these actions, two-thirds or more of parents (depicted by the blue shading) supported schools addressing racism in these ways. [10] For example, 71% of parents in schools that created curriculum to address racism, bias, diversity and inclusion in the classroom supported this action and only 29% did not. Parents were more evenly divided in schools not taking these actions. For example, 49% of parents in schools that did not hold forums/events to address these issues were glad the schools did not and 51% wish they had. Our data also reveal differences across school sector, racial, socioeconomic, and political groups. Public school parents, Black and Asian parents, lower-income parents, and Democratic parents were more likely to report wanting schools to address racism.

Figure 3: Percent of Parents Reporting their School/School System Did a Good or Excellent Job Responding to Protests Following the Death of George Floyd

[10] This finding supports other research that suggests that a majority of parents are open to schools discussing racism with students.



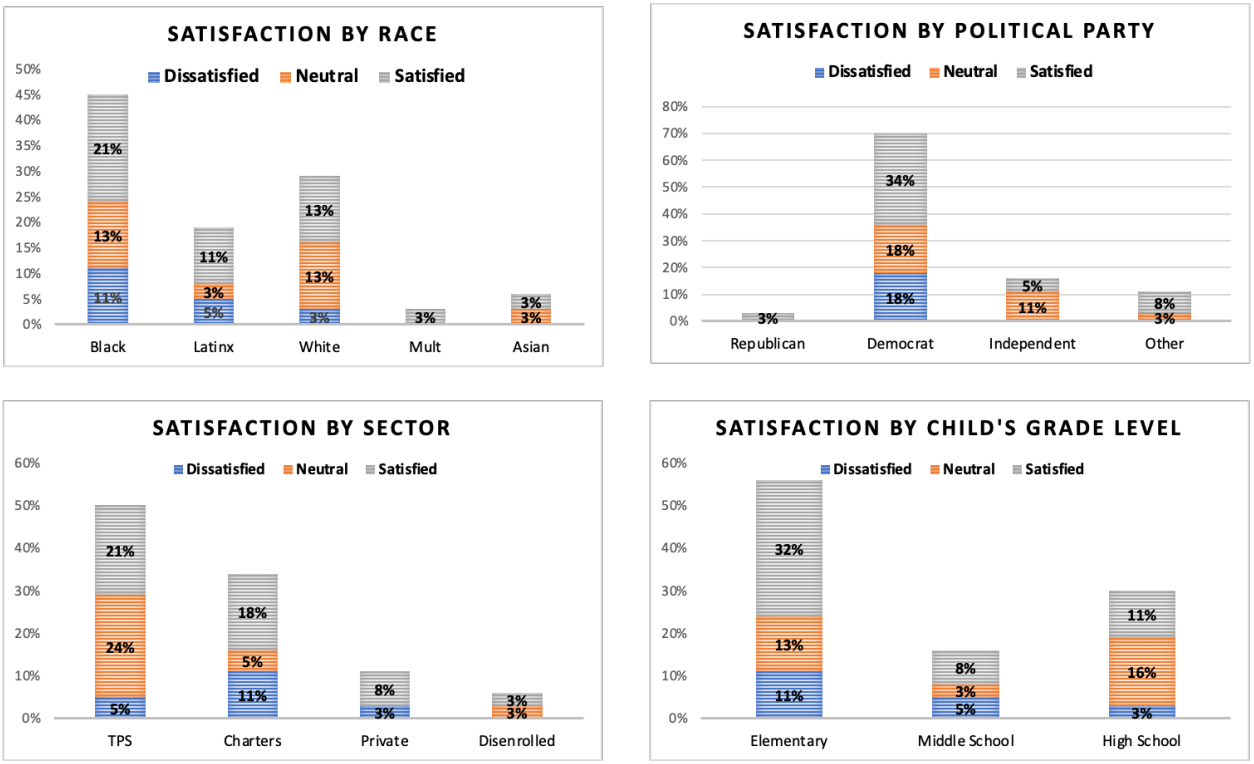
Lastly, we asked parents to rate the overall quality of their schools' responses to the events following the death of Mr. Floyd. Overall, 64% of parents indicated satisfaction: 30% parents reported that their school/school system did an excellent job with their actions to address racism and 34% rated they did a good job (25% rated it average, 7% poor and 3% terrible). Again, we saw patterns in the data. For instance, private school parents were more likely to report satisfaction (good or excellent) than public school parents; White, Asian and Hispanic parents reported more satisfaction than Black parents; and, higher-income parents reported more satisfaction than lower-income parents (see Figure 3).

From this data, we learned that a majority of parents in our sample wanted schools to address racial injustice, and a slight majority of their schools took actions to do so. We also know that a majority of parents surveyed were satisfied with school responses. Nevertheless, these data also indicate important differences in parent views based on sector, racial background and income. However, the survey data does not explain *why* parents were satisfied or unsatisfied. As a team, we believed it was crucial to understand what drove satisfaction (or lack thereof) and turned to interviews with parents to help provide a more nuanced, contextualized understanding of their experiences.

We turn to qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 38 parents who responded to our survey to help us make sense of the patterns we found in the survey (see Table X). In the interviews we asked parents about their survey responses and more broadly about how school

leaders were responding to racism and acts of race-based violence. In our analysis for this report, we not only analyzed the data to unpack *why* parents were dissatisfied, but we paid specific attention to how parents experienced schools' responses across racial groups, political party affiliations, school sectors, and grade level (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Parent Interviewee Satisfaction with School Responses to Racial Injustice, Disaggregated by Race, Political Party, Sector, and Child's Grade Level



As was found in survey data, among the 38 interviewed parents, reactions overwhelmingly ranged from "neutral" (32%) to "satisfied" (51%), with few parents voicing dissatisfaction (19%) with their school's response to racialized violence. Black parents made up the majority of dissatisfied parents (11%). Among dissatisfied Black parents, 75 percent were parents of charter school children enrolled in remote learning modalities. Among those in our sample, Latinx parents were the only racial demographic to express dissatisfaction within the public school sector; however, there we did not find patterns related to learning modalities (i.e., in-person, remote, or hybrid) among this group of dissatisfied parents. Each sector of education (with the exception of disenrolled families) had at least one parent who voiced dissatisfaction. Similarly, parents across secondary education levels voiced feelings that ranged from satisfied to dissatisfied.

Overall, parents had many shared reasons as to why they were satisfied or dissatisfied with their schools' response or lack of response. Their explanations were not specific to sector,

modality, or site and often overlapped, despite differing levels of satisfaction. In other words, we did not see clear patterns of difference between parents in charter or private schools compared to traditional public schools. Similarly, the views of parents with kids learning online were often quite similar to those learning in person. Instead, our findings indicate that parents' subjective realities and social demographics primarily informed their perceptions of school responses to incidents of racialized violence.

As parents explained their unique experiences, three critical themes emerged as to *why* parents reported feeling satisfied or dissatisfied with their schools' responses, at the time that they completed the survey. In the sections that follow, we expand on how parents discussed their perceptions and experiences through three salient drivers of (dis)satisfaction: (1) silence and neutrality–the existence and nonexistence of school responses; (2) the influence of age (in)appropriate content; and (3) emotional and mental health provisions–the importance of healing spaces.

Silence and Neutrality: The Existence or Nonexistence of a School Response

Across our data, parents' satisfaction was most commonly associated with their approval of newsletters, emails, and/or curricula focused on promoting diversity and fostering a sense of belonging within the school community. Overall, we found that 57% of Latinx participants, 50% of Asian parents, and 46% of Black parents were pleased with their school's response to issues of racial injustice. In particular, these parents wanted support in addressing such topics with their children and saw schools as a resource. Likewise, they were disappointed when schools did not address racism. For instance, a Latinx traditional public school parent in Denver shared that she appreciated her school's new approach to history:

> *Right away, they were on top of things and they were teaching more lessons that had to do with real history, not the history that they taught us all these years. They had a lot of assignments where the kids got to speak their minds, whether it was through the assignment or even through art and poetry. They had an outlet to kind of vent about how they were feeling about things.*

Alternatively, the most commonly cited explanation as to why parents felt neutral or dissatisfied was related to a perception that their school had been "silent", or took no action, in response to incidents of racialized violence–such as the murder of Mr. Floyd. As highlighted above, the majority of Black parents expressed great dissatisfaction when schools did not address highly publicized instances of racialized violence. For instance, one Black parent from New Orleans was particularly unsatisfied with what was perceived as a deficient school response. This charter school parent explained, "Well, I think my disappointment was that they

didn't make a statement, didn't acknowledge it…it was not brought up at all." When describing her disappointment with his school's silence, another Black charter school mom in Detroit explained, "His school is, I would say, probably 90% percent Hispanic. I don't know. I just wish they would have acknowledged it". She went on to say, "you don't want children to be afraid of the police…because you want them to go to them for help; but also these injustices are happening. I wouldn't know how to explain that to my child…Maybe they would have a better way of explaining it to them." Her response indicated the value she placed on educators as professionals in the industry of child development and learning and hope that they may have something to offer her in delivering this information to children in a way that is appropriate for their understanding. This was a common stance for many participants of color in our sample who felt satisfied with a school's response or dissatisfied with a school's lack of response.

White parent satisfaction, as it related to the theme of silence and inaction, was a more complicated story, and more commonly revealed satisfaction with school inaction. A subset of White parents were pleased that schools were addressing issues of racial injustice. Of those White parents who voiced satisfaction with their schools' response (45% of all White interviewed parents), only 18 percent attributed their satisfaction to the dissemination of newsletters or emails that centered age-appropriate messages around diversity in solidarity with the overwhelming majority of Black and Latinx parents in our interview sample. For instance, one White parent of a charter school child in Denver shared, "[the school] did do a good job of [addressing racial injustice] in advisory meetings, going and touching on the protests and the discrimination, and all that." Another White virtual charter school parent in Portland expressed that it was very important for schools to have an anti-racist stance. The father explained, "Well, I think it's important for them to reiterate that they oppose racism or bullying or any of those things, and it won't be tolerated at school, and especially here in Portland." Tying racism to the interpersonal experience of being generally othered or bullied, the parent felt it important that the school enforce an intolerance of racialized incidents of conflict between students. Similarly, another White parent preoccupied with the moral issue of interpersonal racism explained that "despite those instances [of public and viral displays of racialized violence]," it was important for schools to continuously reinforce the importance of "treating one another with dignity, and as human beings deserving of respect."

However, the majority of White parents who expressed satisfaction were satisfied when schools did not address public instances or systemic realities of racial injustice. More often, White parents in our sample held perceptions that indicated a belief that these issues were unrelated to their school's microcosm or too contentious in nature for their children to process. For instance, one White voucher-receiving private-school parent in New Orleans explained:

> *I think that's a sore subject. That's like bringing religion into a school, especially a public school. You know, a private school maybe more so because you're going to have a little bit more educated children that may have an understanding, but that's almost like talking politics when you're talking race, you know what I'm saying? …that's just a sore subject.*

His comments revealed the logic behind many White parents' concerns, which indicate that preserving comfortability might be more important than the potential growth, healing, and community building that might stem from active school responses to such incidents. This type of concern led White parents to report a greater likelihood of feeling "neutral" or "satisfied" when schools remained silent on incidents of racialized violence than most participants of color.

Further, White parents in our sample expressed greater satisfaction with symbolic responses (e.g., statements, reemphasizing anti-bullying policies) and less satisfaction when schools responded in structural ways (e.g., curriculum changes). Conversely, racially minoritized parents, especially Black parents, were generally pleased when school systems took a more active role in children's processing and learning about issues of racial injustice. Divergences such as these posed challenges for districts trying to navigate not only stewarding student learning on this relevant topic, but also parent perspectives on how to best carry out this stewardship. For instance, the same Portland father who said it was important for schools to have an anti-racist stance against bullying went on to say:

> *So, it was important for [schools] to address it, but I didn't see a need to include it in the curriculum, necessarily. I feel like it's more my job as a parent to have those conversations about what's happening and what racism is and how important it is to be inclusive and so I didn't have a problem with them not going further than just what they sent. I don't think they were overly helpful but that didn't bother me. I didn't expect any help from a school.*

Here, the parent is suggesting that he expects the school to value anti-racism, but does not expect the school to align the curriculum to reflect this value. Likewise, another White traditional public school parent in Denver shared, "It didn't matter to me so much if they held [racial injustice] forums or anything. Those are discussions I can have with my own son." These parents, like the majority of White parents within our sample, implied that it is the guardian's responsibility to educate themselves on the matter of racism, develop age-appropriate ways to teach their children about racism, and convey lessons as to how to respond in anti-racist ways, at home.

Interestingly, one Black parent also shared concerns about her child's school taking the lead on racial justice topics. However, she was not preoccupied with whether or not it was the school's place, but rather she was wary of the school's capacity to provide a culturally affirming response and learning environment for Black children. The mother explained:

> *I wouldn't want to leave it in their [the school's] hands, because I know that they wouldn't get it right. They would have to...This is something that you have to be really passionate about, you know what I mean? Like, you have to really, really care, and I don't think that a lot of people…necessarily care as much as they pretend that they do.*

In this Black mother's case, she preferred the school's lack of response for fear of the school causing additional damage to her child. This differed from the rationale of the White parents in our sample, who suggested the school was overstepping a boundary by integrating racial justice content more substantively into students' educational experience.

Furthermore, White parents seemed to conflate racial equity and social justice with other moral constructs–such as kindness, equality, and/or diversity. For example, one White parent, whose child was enrolled in a New Orleans charter school, shared that her school's culture of diversity and respect was an adequate substitute for discussions on systemic racial injustice. The mother shared:

> *And so even when they're unable to talk about things explicitly with young children, the fabric of what they're doing is already enforcing and showing the beauty in diversity and the beauty in loving one another–despite those instances [of highly publicized racial injustice].*

Her sentiments suggest that White parents' who perceived morality as a root cause of racial injustice—rather than history, politics, or policy—commonly felt it was sufficient to discuss messages of togetherness and community, rather than the harsh realities of the lived experiences of people of color within their communities. It is difficult to say why these parents felt empowered to adequately discuss issues of racial injustice at different stages in their children's development, or how these parents developed their own understanding of race, racism, or anti-racism—as this was beyond the scope of our inquiry. However, based on our interviews, such sentiments shared by White parents indeed contributed to their expressed dissatisfaction when schools attempted to deliver information, resources, or support following incidents of racialized violence.

The Influence of Age (In)appropriate Content

A salient driver of parents' satisfaction (and dissatisfaction) with schools' responses was the perceived age appropriateness of content delivered in response to incidents of racialized violence. As the Black mother from Detroit (cited in the previous section on silence) expressed her assuredness that some sort of response was appropriate, she went on to acknowledge the importance of the content being age appropriate when she humbly shared:

> *I don't know how to explain [incidents of systemic racial injustice] because you don't want children to be afraid of the police…because you want them to go to them for help; but also these injustices are happening. So, I wouldn't know how to explain that to my child. I don't know if they would. Maybe they would have a better way of explaining it to them.*

Her sentiments reflect the dissonance that occurs when guardians are trying to make sense of such incidents themselves, while trying to think of age appropriate ways to sooth and inform children, following such incidents. However, age appropriateness was not a concern shared among the majority of Black parents; in fact, of those who mentioned it at all (19%), the majority attributed their satisfaction to their perception that their school responded in an age appropriate manner. This may be because Black parents are compelled to have conversations with their children about racial injustice at a younger age than parents of other races (Underhill, 2019).

That said, concern for age appropriateness was especially salient among White parents. In fact, the majority of satisfied White parents expressed satisfaction with their schools' inaction, due to concerns for age inappropriateness. For instance, one parents' perceptions of age-appropriate content shaped their decision whether or not to share anti-racist materials provided by schools. Another White traditional public school parent in Portland appreciated the information her daughter's school provided. She stated:

> *It wasn't hard-edged or revolutionary. It was pretty basic fundamental stuff, but I was glad that my daughter was getting it. I was glad that she had questions. She asked about it, and we were able to talk about it over the table. But I always am looking for ways to make sure that that discussion is age-appropriate and is bearing in mind that my kid was already carrying a lot of anxiety and stress, how do we talk about this. That would've been helpful.*

If parents perceived the content as inappropriate for their child's age range, they were less likely to share the materials with their children. This was true across social-demographic groups. For instance, one mixed-race traditional public school parent in Portland shared, "I

remember they had sent out some links that were to some videos, explaining them. And I looked through them, and they were for older kids. So I didn't watch them with my son."

Additionally, White parents in our sample seemed to take issue with the inclusion of racial justice in curricular materials for their children, attributing their dissatisfaction to concerns for age-appropriateness. One example of a parent who took issue with their school's attempt to use curricula to respond to incidents of racialized violence was a White traditional public school parent in Portland who explained:

> *They gave a Ted Talk, and I felt like it wasn't age appropriate or grade-appropriate. So going back to the curriculum…I also was kind of concerned that they were putting ideas in the head of my first grader, for example, that weren't already there. Whereas I just want my first grader just to befriend [others] and be a first grader that loves and includes everyone. …They're going to be doing things that are going to call more attention to it and make this more of an issue for my young child, for example.*

Another White, traditional public school parent echoed the sentiments above, stating, "My concern was just that it was kind of appeasing, more[so], the adult community."

Overall, the parents who worried about the age-appropriateness of the racial injustice curriculum seemed to fear that it could influence the social-emotional health of students if discussed with students at too early of an age. This is a fair concern. However, our interviews indicate that many White parents never get comfortable with discussing race–as age appropriateness was not a concern exclusively held by parents of young children, in our sample. As Underhill (2019) suggests, these parents may be more likely to "embrace diversity that enriches the social context of White childhood and reject diversity that challenges their children's racial and class privileges" (Underhill, 2019, p. 496). In so doing, these parents' perspectives failed to consider the emotional wellbeing of racially minoritized children who are subject to the realities that they do not want addressed. This last point was raised by some parents interviewed, as discussed next.

Emotional and Mental Health Provisions–The Importance of Healing Spaces

Across racial lines, one key reason parents expressed satisfaction with racial injustice conversations is that it provided students with a space to process current events. These parents believed it was the school's obligation to address racism as part of their charge in supporting the emotional and mental health of students. For instance, one Black charter parent in Detroit described her satisfaction with her school's attempt, stating:

> *They sent out emails to parents, and they talked to the children briefly about the situation. It was touching. Even though it was short, it was touching. Because it let us know that they cared. And like I said, they just wanted to get back to their routine and just let the children know, "We care. [If] nobody else cares, we care."*

Here, the mother suggests that her school modeled a sense of care by addressing racial injustice with students. In another example, an Asian traditional public school parent in Portland positively assessed her school's response, "[The school] sent out both emails and flyers through the mail discussing the situations and offering virtual counseling if we or the kids needed it. I thought that was very nice of them."

Parents also shared that students were already familiar with the news and the Black Lives Matter protests due to the internet. As such many satisfied parents specifically appreciated students having a controlled venue to talk about their emotions surrounding the events. For instance, a Black traditional public school parent in Washington, DC shared:

> *I thought that [the racial injustice response] was great because, for a lot of kids, they are aware of what's happening in the world more than I would've been at this age because the internet and the news is on all the time and all that.*

As he went on to express, "They know what's happening, so they gave them that space to just talk everything out," which he thought was great. Likewise, a Latinx parent in Denver shared that school-led conversations provided students with an outlet to "kind of vent about how they were feeling about things." Here it seems that parents were arguing that providing students the opportunity to have conversations about current events and racial injustice was part of the school's responsibility to make provisions within the learning environment that fostered the social-emotional health of students.

CONCLUSION

This report captures a snapshot of school systems' responses to racial injustice from 2020-2021 across eight case study sites. Although the initial framing for this study partially focused on sector differences, we found that traditional and charter school systems were more similar than not in terms of their responses to racial injustice. In both sectors, there was a continuum of responses ranging from symbolic to structural; professional development was highly valued and shaped response type; and decision-making often remained at the district level with limited input from or collaboration with parents and communities. Still, there were some differences across sectors, including varying levels of autonomy and limited cross-sector collaboration.

These sector differences, however, did not seem to significantly shape the cross-case patterns regarding what school systems did and why they responded in those ways. Instead, geographic and political differences between cases were more influential than sector in shaping the patterns we observed. We suggest possible explanations for this, including a theory of situated organizational learning which asserts that local context heavily determines the extent to which school systems take action and learn from that action. Subsequently, we also suggest that these contexts attract and produce leaders that meet the needs and desires of the organization and surrounding community.

Finally, parent perspectives provide important insights into school responses to racial injustice. We find patterns in parent satisfaction with school responses along the lines of class, political affiliation, school type, and race. Notably, White parents in our sample were more content with symbolic school responses and questioned schools' authority in leading conversations around racial injustice, while racially minoritized parents preferred more substantive school responses and expected schools to act as a meaningful resource to students and parents.

As we write this report, the school systems in our sample and nationwide continue to engage in efforts to address racial equity for students. Their responses will continue to unfold and develop as their organizations learn from their own actions, from the actions of the community, from content experts, and from the national conversation. Actions to explicitly address racism will also inevitably face resistance and pushback in the highly polarized national climate we face today. Based on data from our case districts, we conclude with several suggestions for school systems currently responding to issues of racial injustice and those considering a course of action.

Consider the material benefits of the action or policy response. Several of our respondents expressed displeasure with symbolic responses that were absent of substantive changes. The reason for this likely rests with the reality that many symbolic responses do not bring about actual material change in the lived educational realities of racially minoritized students. For school systems that aim to take action that brings about improvement, assess whether the response to racial injustice is more symbolic or structural in form, and consider how—if at all—the response will materially benefit racially minoritized students.

One way to advance beyond symbolic responses is to establish a plan to measure the outcomes of current and future efforts, if appropriate. Though most of our respondents spoke of ways their school system was addressing injustice, little was said about how to determine the effectiveness of their responses on student well-being and academic performance. This is not to

say that every action has to be justified by quantifiable metrics. However, school systems that are using a particular response to reverse negative trends in student data would benefit from composing a data collection and analysis plan over several years.

Invest in meaningful professional development, and consider outside support for students in the meantime. Learning, including adult learning, takes time and intentionality to be done well. As mentioned previously, professional development was critical to school systems where structural change occurred. Professional development informed staff members' attitudes and belief systems toward racial justice, and thus played a role in (re)shaping a district's "zone of normative and political mediation" such that new policy possibilities could emerge. In this way, professional learning and organizational learning are inextricably linked.

Additionally, districts might consider including adult learning options for parents and families that mirror district professional development, as observed in D.C. Public Schools. Families who would like support in discussing issues of racial equity with their children could benefit from having access to such resources. Students could also benefit because the zone of mediation could continue to shift as more of the adult community becomes oriented around similar content.

Still, the challenge is how to serve students well while the adult community learns best practices. An outside organization may be able to assist with classroom-level curriculum interventions and social emotional learning tasks—such as lesson support and small group discussions—while professional development is rolled out system-wide.

Educators must reflect on the ways in which parents' perceptions of school responses vary, based on parents' unique social positionalities (i.e., race, class, political stance, etc.). In doing so, they must also consider that some parents are socially positioned to encourage the evasion of systemic responses to incidents of systemic racialized violence. It is critical that educators recognize that obliging the former group, particularly during heightened moments of racial injustice, comes at the expense of others who understandably require (at minimum) an acknowledgment of the moment in order to feel confident that their children are safe, cared for, and welcomed in their learning environments—at any age.

Schools must remain vigilant in addressing issues of interpersonal racism and structural racism. Schools must also continue to teach students how to process and respond to traumatic events. At present, mass shootings—which are increasingly fueled by racial hatred—are happening nationally, regardless of zip code. Ultimately, pursuing racial justice for students is not solely the responsibility of schools; truly addressing racism and racial violence will require

broader social investments and equity-oriented policies across institutions, and the commitment of agencies and groups extending far beyond schooling. Still, we ask: What role might schools play in addressing racial violence and resultant racial trauma? How might schools and communities come together to better address these issues—within and across racial lines? Future studies should continue to examine what conditions, if any, lead to structural change at the school and district levels. Also, researchers might consider partnering with parents, community members, educators and administrators to study and develop tools that help leadership preparation programs better train system leaders to undertake the important work of advancing racial justice in schools. Education scholars, practitioners, and community members must work independently and collectively to help address these questions.

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