

A CASE STUDY OF ONE DISTRICT'S EFFORTS TO ENACT AND SUSTAIN A  
SYSTEMIC RACIAL EQUITY TRANSFORMATION

by

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For the College

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To my beloved children, Christian, Chancellor, and Destiny, your love and support have been my greatest motivation. You inspire me to reach higher and dream bigger every day. This accomplishment is as much yours as it is mine.

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **A CASE STUDY OF ONE DISTRICT'S EFFORTS TO ENACT AND SUSTAIN A SYSTEMIC RACIAL EQUITY TRANSFORMATION**

by

**Shawn Lassiter**

Ph.D., 2024, and source

Jo Beth Jimerson, Professor

The purpose of this study was to explore one district's efforts to enact a systemic racial equity initiative, with a particular focus on the perceived roles, responsibilities, and effectiveness of the district's leadership. The study involved examining a large urban school district's systemic racial equity policy implementation from 2017 to 2022. The case study design ensured in-depth data collection via artifacts and interviews with persons closely involved with the initiative. The first research question addressed to the five practices for equity-focused school leadership framework with three themes representing prioritizing equity leadership of (a) self-awareness, (b) understanding systemic inequities, and (c) adopting a systemic transformation approach; three themes about preparing for equity practice of (a) shared language, (b) culturally responsive leadership, and (c) paradigm shift; three themes for development of equity leadership teams of (a) an equity team and tools, (b) a systemic professional development plan, and (c) learning communities; four themes for equity-focused systems of (a) equity leadership teams, (b) equity

focused systems, (c) equity and community collaboration, and (d) successes and critiques of district structures; and for the fifth practice of equity sustainability, one theme of systems erosion threatens sustainability. The themes for the perceptions of stakeholders in a systemic racial equity initiative explored the following: (a) centralized leadership versus distributed responsibility, (b) influence and impact on systemic change, (c) perceptions of the superintendent's leadership roles as messenger and symbolic actor, and (d) challenges and criticisms centered on superintendent's political inconsistencies. Only the influence and impact on systemic change theme produced subthemes for this research question, which were (a) influence of the superintendent and (b) impact on systemic change by stakeholders.

Finally, the third research question exploring community perceptions of the initiative and district leadership yielded (a) the polarization of community opinions theme with subthemes of support for racial equity efforts and opposition to racial equity efforts and (b) theme of political influences reflecting the district's racial equity initiatives as shaped by the political landscape of the state's larger political tensions.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“Can Black students just not learn?” shouted a district administrator. I will never forget the painful silence and discomfort that paralyzed a room of campus educators and district leaders that day. The question came from the director of human resources, a White male, during a racial equity training session that laid bare the disturbing achievement gaps between Black students and their White peers. The training featured slide after slide of decades worth of student achievement data, illustrating how Black students consistently underperformed in every category on the national, state, and local standardized tests.

I thought to myself, *what a question*. On the one hand, this person was responding to the horrifying reality that our education system in the United States perpetuates against Black students. On the other hand, they inadvertently unveiled the pervasive belief held by many educators: The achievement disparities, based on race, were rooted in a student’s innate ability rather than on a failed education system. In that silent room, this person was but one voice echoing the sentiments of many.

As an equity specialist in Urban Texas Independent School District (UTISD)<sup>1</sup>, I witnessed firsthand educational leaders grappling with the influence of race in education. I was charged with facilitating racial equity training at all levels of the district. However, I witnessed district and campus leaders blame the academic shortcomings primarily on students and their perceived lack of parent involvement rather than on their biases and behaviors toward those students.

Blaming Black students for racial achievement gaps has been the default response for educators and school leaders for decades (Payne, 2008; Singleton & Linton, 2006). These deficit-based beliefs have proven to be destructive when trying to address racial inequities in education

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<sup>1</sup> All participant and school/campus names are pseudonyms.

(Leonardo, 2007). A crucial matter to address is the issue of children's abilities because disparities in test scores do not stem from inherent racial differences in aptitude. The prevailing belief is that while many students of color do not consistently meet the standards set by state assessments, this achievement gap is not indicative of a deficiency in intelligence or what some might label ability. Research indicates that disparities in academic performance between Black students and students of color stem from unequal educational experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Leonardo, 2007; Singleton & Linton, 2006).

### **The Right to an Education**

Students have the right to enter classrooms across this nation and encounter an education system that provides a high-quality, appropriate environment for emotional support as well as rigorous academic curriculum and instruction. Du Bois (1949/1970) demanded education as a right for Black children by explaining the following:

Of all the civil rights for which the world has struggled and fought for 5,000 years, the right to learn is undoubtedly the most fundamental. . . . The freedom to learn . . . has been bought by bitter sacrifice. And whatever we may think of the curtailment of other civil rights, we should fight to the last ditch to keep open the right to learn, the right to have examined in our schools not only what we believe, but what we do not believe; not only what our leaders say, but what the leaders of other groups and nations, and the leaders of other centuries have said. We must insist upon this to give our children the fairness of a start which will equip them with such an array of facts and such an attitude toward truth that they can have a real chance to judge what the world is and what its greater minds have thought it might be. (pp. 230-231)

This basic freedom to be educated has been denied to Black students across the United States. Historically, Black students have faced internal and external barriers to success in schools

(Singleton, 2015). Several issues contribute to disparities, including social, economic, or political factors outside of school, hostile or uninviting school culture, lack of a sense of belonging, and inadequate curriculum and instruction within schools (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Singleton, 2015).

In Texas, the context of this study was the provision of a quality K-12 education for *all* students and involved meeting both legal and moral obligations according to the state constitution. According to the Texas Constitution, Texas Education Code § 4.001:

The mission of the public education system of this state is to ensure that all Texas children have access to a quality education that enables them to achieve their potential and fully participate now and in the future in the social, economic, and educational opportunities of our state and nation. (p. 1)

All children, including Black children, have a legal right to receive an education that meets their needs and helps them achieve their full potential. Despite this constitutional promise, systemic racism continues to plague the education system in Texas, leaving many Black students with inadequate resources and support to succeed (Alemán, 2007).

### **National Underpinnings of Racial Inequality in Education**

In the United States of America, racism is pervasive. The impacts of racism have manifested throughout the public and private sectors of our society (Bell, 1998; Carter, 2012). The country has a long history of racial inequality in education, including the segregation of schools in the mid-1800s through the mid-1960s (Bell, 1992; Banks, 2019; Ladsen-Billings & Tate, 1997). This segregation was unequivocally systematized in the “separate but equal” doctrine of the 1896 Supreme Court. The Court allowed states to continue educational segregation in government-funded schools if White and non-White schools received equivalent resources (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896). However, non-White schools were excessively underfunded and under-resourced compared with White schools and produced crippling

disparities in educational outcomes for students of color (Banks, 2001). Brooks (2012) explored how race and racism affect the quality and experience of schooling in this country. Brooks recognized race as a social construction created by humans to permit oppressive or racist ideas or practices. Decades of research unveiled racist ideas throughout the education systems, such as curriculum, suspension practices, as well as the lack of access and opportunities for students of color (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012; Milner, 2015; Mayfield & Garrison-Wade, 2015).

In the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, tremendous progress was made in the fight for educational equity. The 1954 Supreme Court overturned the 1896 *Plessy* decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* and pronounced segregation in state-funded schools to be unlawful and illegal. However, states with segregated schools were slow to acknowledge and heed the Court's ruling, which led to additional lawsuits and Court rulings through 1970. Even with the desegregation of publicly funded schools, racial inequality in education persists in the current day (Alexander, 2010; Allen, 2008; Paige & Witty, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Black continues to experience lower levels of academic achievement and excellence (Lopez, 2017), disproportionate suspension and expulsion (Caldera, 2018; Skiba et al., 2002, 2011), and less access to rigorous coursework and extracurricular activities (Oakes, 2005) than their White counterparts.

In the 2000s, President George W. Bush asserted that the “soft bigotry of low expectations” played a significant role in the underachievement of African American students (NCLB, 2002). Bush not only recognized the persistent issue of racial discrimination in society but also emphasized the urgency of addressing biases and inequalities within the educational system. Additionally, President Bush acknowledged the existence of educational “achievement gaps” that disproportionately affected students along socioeconomic and racial lines. In response to these systemic challenges, Bush signed NCLB into law in January of 2002.

However, despite this legislative effort, some academics argue that it fell short of effectively addressing the impact of race in education and failed to demonstrate substantial improvements in academic outcomes for Black students. Scholars such as Chambers (2009) and Ladson-Billings (2006) criticized the use of the term “achievement gap” as a justification for the legislation. They contended that this term overlooked the historical context of education for Black students.

Scholars like Chambers (2009) and Ladson-Billings (2006) have urged for the adoption of a new paradigm that acknowledges the profound influence of race, meritocracy, and privilege in perpetuating the widespread educational inequalities observed across the nation. Ladson-Billings (2006) introduced the concept of the “education debt paradigm,” and Chambers (2009) developed the “achievement gap framework,” both of which shed light on the fundamental causes of disparities in public schools.

According to Ladson-Billings (2006), the term “achievement gap” is an inadequate descriptor for the challenges at hand and suggests viewing educational inequality as an “educational debt.” This perspective allows educators to delve into the root causes of disparities in schools. Ladson-Billings (2006) identified four integral components that contribute to the education debt: historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral.

The historical component underscores the enduring impact of past events and policies on the current state of education, highlighting how historical injustices continue to shape educational disparities. The economic component reflects how economic factors, including resource allocation and funding inequalities, perpetuate educational inequities.

The sociopolitical component explores the broader societal and political forces that maintain disparities in education, such as policies and practices that sustain inequities. Lastly, the moral component, as emphasized by Ladson-Billings (2006), underscores the ethical paradox

within the educational system. It underscores the discrepancy between what is ethically just and what is actually practiced in schools, drawing attention to the need for moral accountability in addressing educational inequality.

Ladson-Billings' (2006) comprehensive framework encourages educators and policymakers to look beyond surface-level disparities and consider the deep-seated historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral factors that contribute to the educational debt. By adopting this more holistic perspective, it becomes possible to develop strategies that address the root causes of educational inequalities and work towards a more equitable educational system.

Other scholars, such as Zeus (2007), critically examined the limitations of NCLB and highlighted its underlying assumption that if students of color exerted more effort and if teachers fulfilled their responsibilities by effectively teaching, then all students would attain academic success. Zeus argued that NCLB failed to acknowledge the systemic disparities that significantly impact student achievement. These disparities include unequal access to healthcare and variations in families' economic accomplishments. By disregarding these societal factors, NCLB operated under the flawed premise of the education system as inherently fair to all students.

President Barack Obama introduced a fresh approach that placed emphasis on policy, disproportionality, mentoring, and additional support (Sanchez & Turner, 2017). Obama drew national attention to the issue of zero-tolerance discipline policies because of their disproportionate impact on Black and Latino students who commit minor offenses. In launching the My Brother's Keeper initiative, the Obama administration specifically targeted the challenges faced by young men of color (Obama, 2014).

Both Bush and Obama assumed national leadership roles in hoping to address the achievement gaps and disciplinary disparities affecting students of color. However, despite these presidential efforts, racial inequities persist. The efforts' focus has been primarily on policy and

strategy without addressing the underlying racial and ethnic biases that shape policies and practices (Gordon, 2018).

### **Educational Inequities in Texas**

Texas is not exempt from racial inequities in K-12 education. The state has a long-standing issue with race and education. Research has consistently shown disparities in educational outcomes between White students and students of color in Texas. According to the Texas Education Agency (2021), there are significant achievement gaps between different racial and ethnic groups in the state. For example, Black students tend to have lower graduation rates and lower performance on standardized tests compared to their White peers (Carpenter, 2007).

Furthermore, disparities in resource allocation contribute to racial inequities in Texas schools. The Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA, 2019) found that schools predominantly populated by students of color receive fewer resources, such as experienced teachers, advanced coursework, and extracurricular opportunities, and operate under circumstances that further perpetuate achievement gaps.

In recent years, several laws have been passed that further exacerbate the achievement gap between Black and White students in Texas. One such law was Senate Bill 4, enacted in 2017, which targeted immigrant communities and increased the collaboration between local law enforcement and federal immigration authorities (Aguilar, 2017). This law has created an environment of fear and insecurity among undocumented families, leading to increased anxiety and stress among students. The fear of deportation and family separation directly impacts a student's ability to focus on their education, hinders academic performance, and exacerbates the achievement gap, particularly for Black students who are disproportionately affected by this legislation (Wiley, 2018).

Another law that exasperates the racial disparity is Texas House Bill 3. House Bill 3, enacted in 2019, represents a significant piece of education legislation with far-reaching implications for the state's school finance system. This legislative effort was framed with the noble intention of rectifying educational inequities that have long plagued underfunded schools and marginalized communities. However, the reality of the law's implementation has raised concerns regarding its efficacy in truly ameliorating these disparities.

While House Bill 3 was designed to be a crucial step toward addressing these issues, its execution has been critiqued for not adequately directing resources toward the specific needs of the most underfunded schools and the communities that need them most. In practice, the law has once again had a disproportionately adverse impact on Black students and other marginalized groups.

The central issue lies in the lack of targeted funding and support, which perpetuates a troubling cycle of inadequately resourced schools. This results in limited access to high-quality teachers and instructional materials. Therefore, it exacerbates the opportunity gap, ensuring that students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds continue to face significant barriers to academic success.

The unintended consequences of House Bill 3 underscore the importance of not only well-intentioned legislation but also the need for careful and equitable implementation to ensure that resources are allocated in a manner that genuinely addresses the educational disparities experienced by marginalized communities, with a particular focus on the needs of Black students. Without this critical attention to detail and equity, the cycle of inadequate resources and an ever-widening achievement gap persists.

Most recently, House Bill 3979, enacted in 2021, restricted how schools teach about race and racism. The legislation prohibits the teaching of critical race theory (CRT), limits

discussions on current events, and downplays the impact of historical events like slavery and systemic racism. By stifling conversations about race and erasing the full history of racial injustices, this law hinders students' understanding of the complexities of racism and its pervasive effects. The inability to have open and honest discussions about race further perpetuates stereotypes, biases, and systemic inequities, stifling educators' ability to address root causes that are responsible for academic disparities in schools (Singleton & Linton, 2006)

Texas's growing population reflects diversity in race, culture, and income. Since 1850, White people have been Texas's largest demographic until 2021 (Ura, 2023). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Latinos make up the largest share of Texas's population at 40.2% compared to 39.8% of the White population. Koschoreck (2001) noted in research almost 20 years ago that if Texas continues the same rate of population growth, Latinx and Black residents combined will make up the majority of the Texas population in the future. That day has come, and state law has not accounted for this shift. In fact, laws like HB3, along with other policies and practices rooted in systemic racism, continue to contribute to the educational disparities faced by Black students in Texas. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach that challenges systemic racism, promotes inclusivity, and ensures equitable access to resources and opportunities for all students.

### **Equity in Education**

In recent years, equity has taken center stage when advocating for such changes in education. Generally, equity is seen as a gateway to provide students who have been historically marginalized with the necessary tools and resources to achieve success. Singleton (2011) explained educational equity as narrowing the gaps between the lowest and highest achieving students, raising the achievement of all students to the same level, and eliminating racial predictability and disproportionality of which student groups occupy the highest and lowest

achievement categories. Equity efforts in education can be broad and expansive, including race, socioeconomic status, ability, gender, sexuality, etc. However, for the purposes of this study, the issue of race and any intersectionality in relation to race will be the primary focus.

Considering the historical evidence and current proof of racial disparities in education (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Milner, 2015; Mayfield & Garrison-Wade, 2015; Paris, 2012; Singleton & Linton, 2006), it is imperative to adopt a systemic approach to transforming the education system to achieve equity. Singleton (2011) coined the term *systemic equity transformation* to address the impacts of systemic racism in education. The term refers to the process of designing and executing policies and practices that address and eliminate inequities within the educational system (Singleton, 2011). Systemic equity transformation in public schools is not only an ethical and moral obligation but also a vital step in creating a just and equitable society. Education is one of the most powerful assets for social and economic viability (Stevens & Weale, 2004). All members of this society ought to find it unacceptable for students of color to continue to face barriers to accessing quality educational opportunities that lead to future success.

One critical part of systemic equity transformation involves acknowledging that these issues are not individual issues. There needs to be an acknowledgment that inequities have been embedded inside the systems and structures of schools. A primary example of systemic racism includes the “separate but equal” doctrine of the 1896 Supreme Court when non-White schools were excessively underfunded and under-resourced compared with White schools, producing crippling disparities in educational outcomes for students of color (Banks, 2001). Transformative practices seek to uproot inequities and fundamentally change the system to eliminate inequities permanently. This transformation includes changes to mindsets, policies, practices, and resources at the school, district, and state levels.

## **Systemic Equity Transformation in Leadership**

Systems thinkers are best positioned to lead systemic equity transformation. Fullan (2006) contended that systems thinkers are exceptional in leading educational change efforts because they “think and act systemically” (p. 116). Systems thinkers understand the interconnected nature of the education system and the manners by which various pieces of the system impact each other. They are ready to identify and address the root causes instead of just treating side effects. Systems thinkers in leadership positions hold a unique position to lead the work of promoting equity and dismantling systemic racism within the education system (Leithwood et al., 2019). As leaders, they have the power, authority, and influence necessary to ensure meaningful and sustainable change.

Researchers have suggested that systems thinkers, such as superintendents or central district office administrators, occupy the best position for ensuring systemic equity transformation is successful in education (Beard, 2012; Bird et al., 2013; Fullan, 2006; Leithwood et al., 2019; Water et al., 2003). Bird et al. (2013) illustrated the superintendent as occupying a “pivotal organizational perch that has direct and proximate access to board members, building principals, and community residents, as well as direct and proximate influence on vision inception, resource distribution, and operational procedures” (p. 77). This position enables superintendents to enact systemic changes that address inequities and promote a more inclusive and antiracist educational environment (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014; Welton et al., 2018).

However, superintendents who are systems thinkers encounter—but are well-positioned to overcome—risks in their efforts to promote equity, especially racial equity. When various stakeholders show an unwillingness to acknowledge the role of racism in education, their behaviors have a crippling impact on students of color, particularly Black students (McMahon,

2007). As race in education continues to be politicized, “antiracist leaders must be equipped to confront race and racism” and must own the role of a “politically savvy” player in education reform (Welton et al., 2018, p. 628). Culture wars and anti-equity policies of legislatures (including Texas’s legislature) have tested superintendents’ ability to navigate these politics, with several recent superintendents vacating or being forced out of their roles.

Superintendents like Jeannie Stone dedicated over 30 years to serving in education but faced an increasingly contentious climate in Texas public schools by 2020, causing them to resign (Cummings, 2021; Fung, 2021). Stone, who received recognition for advocacy and strides in narrowing learning gaps, was a highly regarded superintendent. The Texas PTA named Stone “Superintendent of the Year” in 2019. Stone was also named “leader in diversity” by the Dallas Business Journal (Cummings, 2021, para 2). However, as Texas schools became embroiled in a culture war, with fierce accusations and rising tensions often stoked by state officials, Stone felt compelled to step away from the superintendent position. The climate included accusations of promoting CRT, backlash over mask mandates during the pandemic, and community divisiveness. Stone, a superintendent committed to educating all students, expressed these feelings when exiting education, “Heartbreaking is a pretty accurate way to describe this. . . . It’s all I’ve ever known. It’s all I’ve ever done. It’s all I ever wanted to do” (Cummings, 2021, para 4). Stone’s departure was not an isolated incident; at least nine North Texas superintendents announced their resignations during the 2021-2022 school year.

The “great exodus” nationally and in Texas occurred amid mounting political and social pressures, including a new state law limiting discussions of race in classrooms, disputes over pandemic safety measures, and scrutiny of available books on campuses (Fung, 2021, para. 1). The toxic atmosphere in school board meetings has added to the pressure. In addition, the pandemic has taken a toll on teachers and staff, further straining the education system. This

exodus is driven by a combination of factors, including ideological divisions and the politicization of education, leaving many educators feeling marginalized and unsupported. Stone and others argue that, instead of discrediting public education, state leaders should support it and work collaboratively with educators and parents to enhance the educational experience for all students (Lopez & Cobb, 2022).

The risks that district leaders face by not engaging in this work are substantial. Failing to address systemic racism and promote equity perpetuates educational inequities and hinders the academic success of marginalized students (Darling-Hammond, 2019; Singleton, 1994). Darling-Hammond et al. (2019) emphasized that addressing racial and socioeconomic disparities is crucial for improving educational outcomes and reducing achievement gaps. Neglecting this work can lead to increased disparities, decreased student engagement, and perpetuation of societal inequalities.

Effective educational leaders are pro-equity and antiracist and exhibit certain hallmarks, including actively acknowledging and addressing systemic racism within the education system and promoting an inclusive and culturally responsive learning environment (Donnor, 2012; Crenshaw, 1997; Khalifa, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Various scholars characterized effective educational leaders as those who prioritize equity, engage in ongoing learning and self-reflection, examine their own biases, and develop strategies to address those biases (Beard, 2012; Roegman, 2017; Shields, 2016; Smith et al., 2011). These effective leaders also prioritize the needs and experiences of marginalized students, empower teachers to create culturally relevant instruction, and foster partnerships with families and communities (Kruse et al., 2018; Paris, 2012; Roegman, 2018).

Issues of race and racism have affected the quality and experience of schooling in this country (Brooks, 2012). Leaders of all sectors have grappled with ways to dismantle systemic

racism by addressing those inequities in policies, practices, and procedures. Decades of researchers explored the ways racist ideals and structural and systemic racism have impacted educational leaders' ability to implement culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy effectively with students of color to ensure they achieve academic success. Evidence points to system leaders, such as superintendents, as best positioned to lead the work of promoting equity and dismantling systemic racism within the education system. Their power stems from their ability to shape policies, allocate resources, and establish a vision for their districts. However, they face risks that include resistance and complex political environments. Nonetheless, effective educational leaders prioritize equity, engage in ongoing learning and self-reflection, and magnify their influence through system-level policies and resource allocation. Failure to engage in promoting equity perpetuates inequities and hinders student success.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The issues of race and racism have been a problem affecting education in the United States (Brooks, 2012). Leaders across various sectors have been wrestling with the challenge of dismantling systemic racism by addressing the inequities embedded in policies, practices, and procedures. Despite the growing emphasis on the importance of equity in education, there is limited research on the specific strategies and practices that superintendents use to lead equity initiatives in diverse urban contexts. Often, the responsibility to identify and address inequities within the school system has been placed on campus principals (Fleig, 2019). In the few studies found, researchers suggested that superintendents are rarely prepared to lead a district in systemic equity transformation (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2007). Additionally, superintendents can act as a barrier to systemic equity transformation by blaming principals, teachers, and parents for students' achievement disparities (Whitt et al., 2015). However, the role of the superintendent is both critical and essential to equity efforts due to the inherent positional power and authority

within the district (Garza, 2008). An understanding of how a district's superintendent can successfully lead systemic equity transformation would address a gap in the body of knowledge about racial equity work in schools.

This study focused on UTISD's efforts to address racial inequity through a racial equity policy. In February 2016, UTISD took a significant step in its commitment to addressing systemic racism and racial disparities within the district. The Board approved the establishment of the Racial Equity Committee, a pivotal move in the fight against institutional racism directly impacting students. The committee embarked on the development of a comprehensive policy, asserting that the responsibility for addressing disparities stemming from institutional racism falls to the adults within the educational community rather than to the students themselves. This momentous decision signaled the district's unwavering commitment to promoting social justice and equity. With the unanimous support of the Board, [UT]ISD, boasting a student population of over 83,000 and a dedicated workforce of more than 11,000 employees, recognized both its power and obligation to be a driving force in dismantling institutional racism within the district and the broader community. The establishment of the committee had the dual purposes of examining district practices and policies thoroughly and providing recommendations for enhancement.

To gain a deeper understanding of the pervasive disparities in student outcomes, the school board initiated an equity audit. The audit revealed glaring student achievement gaps, disproportionate suspension rates, and attendance and dropout statistics, particularly affecting students of color. Notably, these disparities were not newfound issues. In the academic year 2015-2016, as the district was undergoing a transition in leadership, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) raised concerns, designating 21 schools as "improvement required" (IR) and expressing concerns over the district's markedly low state standardized test scores, particularly in literacy

and math. The 2015-2016 Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR) released by TEA indicated that only 60% of third graders read on grade level, in contrast to the state average of 73%. Most alarmingly, only 47% of African American students were meeting the state standards for third-grade reading.

These audit findings prompted the UTISD Board of Trustees to take action to address these pressing issues. Their response comprised three substantial initiatives. First, the board hired a superintendent with a strong focus on equity and a demonstrated record of success with similar demographic challenges. Second, the board created a dedicated department to promote equity and excellence, which not only emphasized equity but also racial equity within the district. Third, the board established a board-appointed committee with a specific mandate to focus on racial equity policies and practices that offered a platform for all stakeholders to contribute their perspectives in addressing these critical issues.

The recognition of the direct correlation between race and educational disparities led to the board's approval of a budget allocation of approximately \$2 million over a 5-year period. These funds were designated for a partnership with Pacific Educational Group (PEG), aimed at developing a comprehensive systemic plan to challenge and transform detrimental beliefs and mindsets regarding students and families, ineffective classroom practices, and district behaviors. The primary focus was on achieving positive outcomes for students, particularly those who identify as students of color, especially African Americans. This multifaceted approach underscored the district's firm commitment to dismantling systemic racism and promoting racial equity within the educational landscape.

### **Purpose and Research Question**

The purpose of this study is to explore one district's efforts to enact a systemic racial equity initiative, with a particular focus on the perceived roles, responsibilities, and effectiveness

of the district's leadership. The study involved examining a large urban school district's systemic racial equity policy implementation from 2017 to 2022. Through this study, I aimed to understand the experiences and approaches of the superintendent who led the equity efforts and how various stakeholders responded to these leadership approaches and proposed initiatives. To this end, the study was guided by the following research questions (RQ):

- RQ1. What practices or strategies were used, and by whom, in efforts to affect the desired change pertinent to the systemic racial equity initiative?
- RQ2. How did stakeholders involved in the racial equity initiative perceive the role of the superintendent or other critical personnel in leading the systemic racial equity initiative?
- RQ3. How did community stakeholders perceive the systemic racial equity initiative and district leadership?

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study lies in its potential to provide insights and best practices for other superintendents who are seeking to lead equity-oriented change in their districts. By understanding the experiences and leadership practices of an equity-oriented superintendent, along with the school district's educational leaders, scholars, policymakers, and superintendent, preparation program personnel might develop a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with equity work in urban public school districts. The findings might show how school leaders can work to promote equity in their schools and address the persistent disparities in educational outcomes experienced by students of color at the school level as an aspect of the overall educational system formed in one school district.

In addition, this study has broader implications for the field of educational leadership and equity. The findings of the study might show how school leaders can work to promote equity in

their schools and address the persistent disparities in educational outcomes experienced by students of color. By shedding light on the strategies and practices of an equity-oriented school system, the findings can contribute to the development of more effective superintendent preparation programs, policies, and practices aimed at promoting social justice and addressing systemic inequalities in education. Overall, this study provided important insights into the leadership practices of a superintendent leading a racial equity initiative in a large urban school district, with the potential to inform the work of other superintendents and contribute to the broader field of educational leadership and equity.

### **Chapter Summary**

In summary, Chapter One meticulously delineated the historical and contemporary challenges entwined with racial inequities in the American education system, with a specialized focus on the Texas educational landscape. Against the backdrop of Texas' evolving demographic dynamics necessitating a reevaluation of educational policies, the superintendent's pivotal role in steering systemic equity transformations to rectify racial disparities emerges as indispensable. Recognized as instrumental figures wielding the authority to shape policies and allocate resources, the narrative underscores the urgency of addressing racial inequities in education and accentuates the superintendent's paramount role in instigating enduring and meaningful change. However, this trajectory is fraught with inherent risks, encompassing political challenges and resistance from stakeholders averse to acknowledging the pervasive role of racism in education. The imperative for equity transformation necessitates a holistic approach, acknowledging that countering systemic racism demands a comprehensive response. This narrative serves as a poignant reminder that the pursuit of equity in education transcends ethical considerations, constituting a fundamental stride toward the establishment of a society underpinned by principles of justice and impartiality.

In Chapter Two, I provide an in-depth exploration of the literature. I delve into the evolution of the superintendent role, the impact of equity on leadership dynamics, and the intricacies of organizational change. This thorough examination aims to establish a robust foundation for the ensuing study.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

The purpose of this study is to explore one district's efforts to enact a systemic racial equity initiative, with a particular focus on the perceived roles, responsibilities, and effectiveness of the district's leadership. In this chapter, I review three major strands of equity initiatives found in the research literature. First, I explore the role of the superintendent, including its history and evolution. Second, I examine the intersection of equity and superintendent roles. Finally, I delve into organizational and systems change research because school districts are complex organizations and systems.

### **The Role of the Superintendent**

#### **History/Evolution of the Role**

The role of the superintendent in K-12 public education has evolved in response to changing student demographics and government policies. Initially, the superintendent's role resembled an executive officer running a business. However, it has become more comprehensive and complex, adapting to the diverse student population and pursuing academic excellence (Black & English, 2001; Kowalski & Bjork, 2005; Skrla et al., 2009).

Callahan (1966) researched the evolution of the superintendent role and identified two major shifts. The first shift occurred between the late 1920s and 1954, transitioning from a "business-managerial executive type to an educational statesman in a democratic school" (p. 7). The second shift, prominent after 1954, positioned the superintendent as an "applied social scientist and educational realist" (Callahan, 1966, p. 8). The superintendent's role has historically mirrored societal shifts, coinciding with the rise of school leadership within the field of education, including educators and teacher leaders (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski & Bjork, 2005).

Before the 1850s, superintendents were primarily perceived as clerical support for school boards reluctant to relinquish their power (Barnett, 2003). However, from 1850 through the early 1900s, school leadership emerged within the ranks of educators and teacher leaders (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski & Bjork, 2005). During this period, superintendents were recognized as instructional leaders who established the academic vision and objectives for the district, overseeing the implementation of instructional programs and policies (Bjork et al., 2014). Their central role involved collaborating with educators to enhance teaching and learning while working alongside other school leaders to improve instructional practices and protocols, conducting thorough evaluations, and implementing necessary adjustments as deemed essential.

Kowalski and Bjork (2005) comprehensively analyzed the superintendent's role spanning a century, revealing significant shifts in response to population growth in school districts from the 1900s to the 1930s. This transition led to a greater emphasis on organizational management (Kowalski & Bjork, 2005). The superintendent's role evolved from that of a teacher to that of a manager or organizational leader, taking on responsibilities such as overseeing daily operations, managing budgets, making personnel decisions, and supervising facilities (Barnett, 2003; Bjork et al., 2014). The superintendent collaborated with various stakeholders, including governing bodies, elected officials, caregivers, and community members, to ensure the district's effective and efficient functioning. This managerial focus persisted for approximately three decades, driven by the encouragement and support of the education system and influential figures known as "big-city elites" (Kowalski, 2005, p. 103) who advocated for enhanced productivity and efficiency. However, during this period, scholars criticized superintendents for allegedly prioritizing administrative tasks over teaching and learning, leading to perceptions of superiority compared to teachers (Callahan, 1962). Kowalski and Bjork (2005) depicted superintendents as individuals lacking conviction and political courage, including referring to them as "dupes" who

were “powerless and vulnerable” and unwilling to defend their profession or the integrity of public education (p. 103).

Following World War II, the superintendent’s role underwent a significant transformation, influenced by the country’s commitment to democracy. This shift occurred from 1929 to 1954 when the superintendent was characterized as a democratic leader (Kowalski & Bjork, 2005) and an educational statesman (Callahan, 1966). Bjork (2014) later described the superintendent’s role as a community leader, in which the superintendent serves as a representative of the school district and fosters relationships with community partners. Black and English (2001) provided a nuanced perspective on the superintendent’s role by highlighting its complexity and interconnectedness. They identified effective communication as the primary factor in superintendent success. Black and English argued that superintendent preparation programs often overlook critical attributes needed by effective superintendents, such as political abilities, instructional leadership skills, change agent capacity, and management skills.

During the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s, the role of the superintendent evolved into an applied social scientist (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). The Kellogg Foundation played a significant role in this transformation by allocating funds to eight research universities, aiming to equip aspiring superintendents with a deeper understanding of major social issues through an interdisciplinary approach involving multiple social sciences. The intention was to foster problem-solving abilities among superintendents for navigating the complexities of a multicultural democratic society (Sergiovanni et al., 1999). The applied social scientist period suggested superintendents needed to draw on research and knowledge from various fields to address the social challenges faced in education and society.

From the mid-1970s to 2005, the role of superintendents shifted to embracing a more communicative approach. The demand for reform initiatives and the changing social

environment compelled superintendents to recognize themselves as communicators (Schein, 1992). Schein (1992) argued that effective organizations prioritize communication and information, fostering learning cultures that facilitate connections among all members (p. 370). As communicators, superintendents are responsible for disseminating information and engaging with various stakeholders, including students, parents, educators, and community members. This communication encompasses not only transmitting information but also listening actively to the needs and concerns expressed by stakeholders while fostering transparent and honest dialogue (Black & English, 2001).

In the 21st century, superintendents have been regarded as visionary leaders capable of navigating intricate challenges and affecting substantial, enduring change for students, families, and communities (Black & English, 2001). The superintendent's role continuously evolves to reflect shifts in American society and the education system. Superintendents must now excel as communicators and change agents, actively working to ensure positive transformations in their schools and communities. Additionally, they must adroitly manage complex budgets and resources and skillfully navigate education's demanding political landscape (Björk et al., 2014; Kowalski, 2005; Roegman et al., 2017).

The year 2020 propelled superintendents into a new realm, as they found themselves at the epicenter of a national and global crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic and racial unrest in the country necessitated that superintendents exhibit proficiencies in promoting crisis management and change and managing politics (Campbell, 2022). Politics represents an inherent aspect of the education landscape. As politicians, superintendents maneuver the complexities of educational politics, collaborating with diverse individuals and organizations to advocate for the needs of their district and students. Collaboration with policymakers and decision-makers ensures opportunities for advocating for policies and resources that align with a district's objectives

(Gonzalez et al., 2022). Furthermore, as change agents, superintendents are responsible for fostering positive transformations within their districts, whether by implementing new programs or initiatives or by addressing issues of inequality and injustice. These transformations necessitate a willingness to take risks, confront challenges, and inspire and mobilize others toward a shared goal of equity (Campbell, 2022).

### **Today's Superintendent**

The role of the superintendent in today's education system is undeniably one of immense challenge and significance (Decker, 2016; Kowalski, 1999). Superintendents are expected to possess a broad range of knowledge encompassing educational policy, research, effective communication, political acumen, and managerial skills (Glass, 1992; Grissom & Anderson, 2012). As visionary leaders, superintendents must navigate complex challenges and strive to bring about profound and sustainable changes that benefit students, families, and communities.

Superintendents are responsible for overseeing daily operations, setting goals and objectives, managing budgets, and ensuring the academic success and well-being of all students. However, in recent times, the superintendent role has become more demanding (Edwards, 2007). The global pandemic and unrest surrounding racial inequality have altered school districts' functioning. These circumstances prompted superintendents to confront deeply rooted inequities and reimagine the vision of an equitable education, particularly for students of color.

The evolving landscape has caused superintendents to be change agents for equity and serve as catalysts for transformative, socially just action within their districts. The focus on equity has intensified, making the role more vital than in the past. It is a pivotal moment in which superintendents must rise to the occasion if they seek to address systemic barriers, dismantle inequitable structures, and foster inclusive environments that nurture the success of every student, regardless of race. Superintendents have the power to shape the future of education and

create a more equitable and just society for all if they engage in visionary leadership (Black & English, 2001; Boyd, 1974; Dawson & Quinn, 2000; Duvall, 2005).

### **Influence of Equity and Superintendent Roles**

The increasing focus on equity in education has prompted scholars to examine the influence of equity on educational leaders, including superintendents (Maxwell et al., 2013). Making a conscious decision to prioritize equity can profoundly impact the superintendent's responsibilities (Roegman, 2017; Villani, 2021). As an equity-oriented change agent (EOCA), the superintendent assumes the vital task of advancing social justice and ensuring equitable access to resources and opportunities for all students (Maxwell et al., 2013). Advancing social justice and ensuring equitable access encompasses upholding policies and practices that address systemic inequalities, such as supporting culturally responsive teaching and addressing the disproportionate suspension rates of Black girls (Caldera, 2018; Khalifa, 2020). In their capacity as instructional leaders, equity-oriented superintendents prioritize narrowing achievement and opportunity gaps while promoting comprehensive and culturally responsive practices within classrooms (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014; Khalifa, 2020; Singleton, 1994). Their focus is to ensure that all students, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, or learning needs, have access to rigorous curriculum and effective pedagogy.

As organizational leaders, equity-oriented superintendents strive to create fair and just district policies and practices. They foster an environment in which all students and staff receive support and have value. They explicitly address issues of implicit bias and discrimination and implement equity policies that facilitate systemic transformation (Khalifa, 2012; Singleton, 1994).

Lastly, as community leaders, equity-oriented superintendents actively cultivate relationships with community organizations and groups. They advocate for policies that benefit

historically marginalized communities and groups. They take the lead in empowering parents from underrepresented communities by encouraging parent engagement in the decision-making process within the district (Roegman, 2018; Shields, 2016; Singleton, 1994). By embracing these multifaceted roles, equity-oriented superintendents play a crucial part in driving meaningful change and dismantling systemic barriers within the education system. Their commitment to equity not only shapes the experiences of students but also contributes to building a more inclusive and just society for all (Maxwell et al., 2013).

### **Culturally Responsive Educational Leadership**

Educational leaders must possess a deep understanding of history and context. They need the ability to challenge existing power structures to promote social justice, equity, and antiracism. Culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally responsive leadership, and CRT often arise in discussions of educational equity. These concepts are all essential components of leadership development, particularly for superintendents and educational leaders. Race conscious leaders have the necessary tools to address racial inequities effectively. They recognize the importance of centering race in data, policy, and practice and use research as a foundation for advancing equity-focused policies and practices.

Culturally responsive pedagogy focuses primarily on teaching practices and curriculum design that recognize and incorporate the diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences of students (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2018; Paris, 2012). This inclusive pedagogy is grounded in the idea that effective teaching must be sensitive to the cultural contexts in which learning occurs (Gay, 2018). In contrast, culturally responsive leadership extends this approach to the realm of educational leadership, emphasizing that school leaders should foster an inclusive, culturally aware environment within their institutions (Ainscow, 2005; Anderson, 2009; Khalifa

et al., 2016). This involves not only understanding students' diverse backgrounds but also valuing and leveraging those differences to create equitable learning opportunities.

Critical race theory (CRT) provides a theoretical framework that underpins both culturally responsive pedagogy and leadership (Ladson-Billings, 2020; Lynn & Parker, 2006). CRT posits that race is a social construct, and it critically examines how racial hierarchies and racism are embedded in societal structures and institutions, including education. By integrating CRT into leadership preparation programs, aspiring leaders gain a deep understanding of the historical and systemic roots of racial disparities in education (Khalifa et al., 2013; Radd, 2021; Rojas, 2018). They learn to critically analyze policies, practices, and power structures that perpetuate these inequities and to challenge them effectively.

The interplay between these three concepts is crucial in leadership development, especially for superintendents, as it equips them with a comprehensive toolkit to navigate the complexities of educational equity and antiracism (Radd, 2021). By embracing culturally responsive pedagogy and leadership, educational leaders foster inclusive, culturally sensitive learning environments (Ladson-Billings, 2020; Lynn & Parker, 2006). Simultaneously, integrating CRT into their skill set enables them to understand the systemic nature of racial disparities, challenge oppressive structures, and advocate for antiracist policies and practices. Therefore, leadership programs must incorporate these three interconnected components to prepare leaders who can address racial inequities comprehensively and strive for a more equitable and just educational landscape (Radd, 2021; Singleton, 2012).

However, the promotion of equity and antiracism in schools often faces opposition at various levels (Marrun et al., 2023). As a result, educational leaders navigate challenges and stand firm in their commitment to equity. The role of educational leadership in advancing

antiracist and equity-oriented work is crucial, and frameworks and paradigms provide guidance for leaders to drive meaningful change in their school districts.

Superintendents play a pivotal role as equity-oriented leaders by fostering inclusive, just, and equitable educational environments. By embracing these leadership approaches and strategies, superintendents can create transformative, socially just, and antiracist educational systems that promote equitable opportunities and outcomes for all students (Allen & Liou, 2019; Brooks & Watson, 2019; Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Khalifa et al., 2013).

### **Superintendents as Equity-Oriented Leaders**

Within the field of educational leadership, numerous terms have emerged to conceptualize and frame the critical work of fostering equity in educational systems. These terms encompass a range of perspectives and approaches. Social justice leadership, as discussed by scholars like Bogotch (2002) and Theoharis (2009), emphasizes the importance of addressing systemic inequities and advocating for justice within educational contexts. Transformative leadership, as articulated by Shields (2016), focuses on leadership practices that bring about fundamental and positive changes in educational systems, particularly in relation to equity. Culturally responsive school leadership, as explored by Khalifa et al. (2016) and Khalifa (2020), underscores the significance of leadership that is attuned to the diverse cultural backgrounds and needs of students and communities. Antiracist leadership, as discussed by scholars Brooks and Witherspoon Arnold (2013), Gooden and Dantley (2012), and Welton et al. (2019), centers on leadership practices that actively challenge and dismantle racist structures and beliefs within educational institutions. These various terms reflect the rich tapestry of approaches and perspectives within the realm of equity-oriented educational leadership.

## *Transformative Leadership*

School districts are a microcosm of the surrounding society and often inherit social norms, constructs, and societal ills. Transformative leadership is used by superintendents to distribute the status quo in the educational system to shift culture and academic outcomes for students (Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Shields, 2016). Transformative leadership is not exclusive to equity; however, it can serve as an effective tool for equity transformation. Gooden (2012) argued that transformative leadership requires educational leaders to have a deep understanding of their institution's culture and the willingness to challenge the status quo. Strategically creating social change improves the experience of all students within the district, especially those who are marginalized and oppressed (Shields, 2016).

The literature supports the importance of transformative leadership in promoting equity and antiracism in schools. Shields (2016) posited that transformative leadership is essential for promoting equity and social justice in schools. The leader must possess the ability to identify and dismantle systemic barriers that impede equitable access to education. Alston (2005) examined the experiences of Black female superintendents in the US and identified them as “tempered radicals,” who “are change agents who work within existing systems to transform them from within” (p. 677). They understand the importance of transformative leadership in addressing issues of social justice because “transformational leadership is critical in leading an organization toward equity and justice” (Alston, 2005, p. 680).

Educational leaders must have the ability to identify and dismantle institutional racism to create a more equitable educational system. Dantley (2003) proposed the concept of critical spirituality, which involves using critical theory and Black prophetic spirituality to enhance transformative leadership because “critical spirituality represents a new way of thinking about leadership and its role in promoting social justice and equity in our schools” (p. 3). The

transformative leader's primary goal is to create equitable educational opportunities for all students by transforming the educational system's policies and practices.

### ***Culturally Responsive Leadership***

Culturally responsive school leadership, as advocated by Khalifa (2020) and Khalifa et al. (2016), emphasizes the importance of recognizing and valuing diverse cultural backgrounds and identities within educational settings. Culturally responsive school leaders understand that students come from various cultural contexts, and they strive to create inclusive and supportive environments that honor and celebrate these differences. These leaders prioritize culturally relevant pedagogy, curriculum, and instructional practices that resonate with students' backgrounds and experiences. They actively seek to address disparities in educational outcomes and ensure that all students, regardless of their cultural backgrounds, have equitable access to resources and opportunities. By embracing culturally responsive leadership, superintendents can foster a sense of belonging, promote academic success, and empower students to thrive in a multicultural society.

### ***Social Justice Leadership***

Social justice leadership, unlike transformative leadership, focuses on addressing issues of social justice and equity in education. Bogotch (2002) defined social justice leadership as the ability to create and sustain a school culture that values diversity and social justice because "social justice requires ongoing struggle and cannot be separated from the educational theories and practices of professionals, schools, academic disciplines, and governmental agents" (p. 1). Scholars explored superintendents challenging dominant societal beliefs by providing counter-narratives (Furman, 2012; Jean-Marie, 2008); advocating for systemic change; and engaging in courageous conversations about race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, ability, language,

and other marginalizing factors (Jean-Marie et al., 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1995, Singleton & Hays, 2008, Theoharis, 2007).

The literature supports the importance of social justice leadership in promoting equity. Theoharis (2007) argued that social justice leadership requires educational leaders to engage in critical self-reflection and work towards creating a school culture that values diversity and social justice. Shifting culture to advance social justice is the beginning of the change, regardless of how the leadership emphasizes the importance of resistance to unjust policies and practices. Social justice educational leaders resist injustice by engaging in a variety of activities that support marginalized communities, including engaging publicly in courageous conversations about race and other forms of oppression, building advocacy strategies, collaborating with stakeholders, and organizing for change (Brooks & Watson, 2019; Singleton & Hays, 2008; Theoharis, 2007, 2009).

Dantley and Green (2015) provided a compelling critique of conventional leadership paradigms when it comes to the pursuit of social justice in educational settings. They challenged the notion that leadership for social justice can be adequately encapsulated within traditional frameworks and advocated for a more radical, prophetic, and historically informed approach. Their argument emphasizes several key points.

First, Dantley and Green (2015) contended that effective social justice leadership must be rooted in a deep comprehension of history and context. This understanding is foundational to identifying and addressing the root causes of social injustices within education. By acknowledging the historical legacies of discrimination, inequity, and oppression, leaders can gain insights into how these injustices have been perpetuated and entrenched in educational systems. They argued that “social justice leadership must be grounded in an understanding of

history and context and must be willing to challenge existing power structures and imagine new possibilities for change” (Dantley & Green, 2015, p. 821).

Second, Dantley and Green (2015) called for a radical imagination by leaders who transcend the confines of incremental change. Rather than simply attempting to ameliorate existing systems, a radical imagination prompts leaders to envision entirely new possibilities for change. This imaginative change entails questioning established norms, challenging the status quo, and considering innovative strategies that disrupt existing power structures.

Lastly, Dantley and Green (2015) underscored the importance of a prophetic stance in social justice leadership. This prophetic stance entails the courage to speak truth to power, advocate for justice even in the face of resistance, and inspire hope for a more equitable educational future. It involves a moral imperative to confront and rectify systemic injustices, regardless of the obstacles encountered along the way. This call to challenge existing power structures and imagine new possibilities aligns with the broader discourse on transformative leadership, in which leaders actively and publicly dismantle inequities and promote social justice in educational contexts.

### ***Racial Equity Leadership***

For the purposes of this study, *racial equity leadership* is defined as an approach that centers on race and racism in education policies and practices. Researchers have warned practitioners of the potential to oversimplify, dilute, misuse, or misunderstand racial equity terminology in reference to the previous leadership styles (Dantley & Green, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Lewis et al., 2023). Superintendents’ ability to differentiate the terminology and build an effective communication plan is critical to their success as racial equity leaders. Kruse (2018) researched the duality of superintendents’ private beliefs and their public messaging about equity and found that superintendents had a general understanding of equity but lacked a

unified understanding. Inconsistency in understanding equity, as well as racial equity, can impact the effectiveness of the superintendent's message and plan (Kruse, 2018).

Racial equity leadership is important in promoting equity and antiracism in schools (Allen & Liou, 2019). Racial equity leaders must possess the ability to engage in critical conversations about race and racism (Brooks & Witherspoon, 2013), identify and dismantle institutional racism to create a more equitable educational system (Allen & Liou, 2019), and have a deep understanding of the intersectionality of race and other forms of oppression (Gooden & Dantley, 2012). These practices are not innate to superintendents. Gooden and Dantley (2012) proposed a framework for leadership preparation that includes CRT, cultural competence, and race consciousness. The framework advocates for centering race in leadership preparation, in which they argue that educational leaders must be equipped to recognize and address the ways that race intersects with other social identities to shape educational experiences and outcomes.

In the field of education, researchers have called for the need to center race in data, policy, and practice (Capper & Young, 2014; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1998; López, 2003, Singleton & Hays, 2008). Research leads the way for practitioners to advance their work and support superintendents' justification to elected officials for the need for equity, specifically racial equity, focused policies, and practices. Lewis et al. (2023) stated:

At the individual level, antiracism requires critical reflection about beliefs, biases, assumptions, and actions that are harmful to people of color (Solomon, 2002). At the system-level, antiracism demands a critical examination of the ways in which policies and practices perpetuate racism. Antiracist work involves actively dismantling systems of power and oppression. (p. 155)

Scholars have proposed various frameworks and paradigms for educational leaders to follow to lead racial equity and antiracist work in educational systems. Khalifa (2012) proposes a new paradigm for successful urban school leadership, which involves principals serving as community leaders. This concept of the superintendent as a community leader is also well supported. Miller (2007) referred to this superintendent leader as a synergist. Leaders possess the ability to connect to people and motivate them to achieve a common goal. Effective leaders have a unique ability to create a balance between being a visionary, systems builder, and administrator while building trust, creating partnerships, and leveraging resources with the community to support student learning and success (Khalifa, 2012; Miller, 2007). Honig and Honsa (2020) propose a “systems-focused” equity leadership learning approach, which involves shifting practice through practice. They argue that leadership learning must be grounded in experiential learning. The importance of using the lived experiences of school leaders and teachers must be situated within the larger social, political, and economic contexts in which schools operate. These frameworks provide guidance and direction for educational leaders to promote equity, antiracism, and social justice in their school districts.

In conclusion, equity-oriented leadership in education encompasses various terms and paradigms, including social justice leadership, transformative leadership, culturally responsive school leadership, and antiracist leadership. Scholars emphasize the importance of these leadership approaches in promoting educational equity, social justice, and dismantling systemic barriers within the education system. Transformative leadership focuses on shifting culture and academic outcomes by challenging the status quo and strategically creating social change (Gooden, 2012; Shields, 2016). Social justice leadership values diversity and aims to create a school culture that upholds social justice principles (Bogotch, 2002; Theoharis, 2007, 2009). Racial equity leadership centers on race and racism, advocating for critical conversations,

dismantling institutional racism, and understanding the intersectionality of race and other forms of oppression (Brooks & Witherspoon Arnold, 2013; Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Welton et al., 2019).

### **Equity-Focused Superintendents in Action**

According to Skrla et al.'s (2009) framework, the EOCA promotes equity and social justice. Maxwell et al. (2013) investigated the experiences and approaches of three rural Texas superintendents working in high-need K-12 public school districts in Texas while promoting equity as social justice and equity change agents. They applied a qualitative case study design, and data included field notes and interviews with the superintendents, district documents, and observations of their leadership practices, applying Skrla et al.'s (2009) framework. Maxwell et al. found the three superintendents had an equity attitude, which involves treating others with respect and care and modeling equity with colleagues. The superintendents avoided demonization, or the tendency to label or stereotype individuals or groups based on biases or prejudices. As EOCA, the superintendents initiated courageous conversations and difficult but necessary discussions about issues of equity and social justice. This effort can involve challenging dominant narratives or power dynamics and working to create a more inclusive and equitable environment.

The three EOCA superintendents demonstrated persistence in their efforts to promote equity and remained committed but patient, recognizing that systemic change can take time. The EOCA superintendents maintained an asset attitude, or a focus on the strengths and resources of individuals and communities, rather than a focus on deficits. They recognized and valued the diverse backgrounds and experiences of all stakeholders and worked to create opportunities for all to succeed. Finally, EOCA maintained a coherent focus to ensure they maintain a clear and consistent approach to promoting equity, which includes setting goals and priorities that align

with the values of equity and social justice and working to achieve these goals in a consistent and strategic manner. The superintendents had a clear understanding of equity and were “attuned to the construct of equity” (Maxwell et al., 2013, p. 10) by using a variety of actions, including revising policies and practices, providing professional development for teachers, and engaging with the community to promote equity.

Overall, Maxwell et al. (2013) highlighted the challenges and successes of three rural Texas superintendents in promoting equity in their school districts. They illustrated the importance of effective leadership in addressing equity issues in education. Finally, they noted that none of the superintendents provided responses fit all seven categories of the Skrla et al. (2009) framework, even though all of them expressed characteristics that fit under multiple categories within the framework.

Ultimately, Maxwell et al. (2013) provided evidence in a case study that the role of the superintendent can and will evolve when intentions of equity are centered. In superintendents, these characteristics influence their varied but interconnected roles in school districts. In their roles as leaders, the EOCAs prioritized addressing achievement gaps and promoting inclusive and culturally responsive practices in the classroom. They worked to ensure that all students have access to high-quality curriculum and resources, regardless of socioeconomic background or learning needs. The EOCA superintendent functions differently from other superintendents to advance equity in school districts.

Achieving transformational outcomes, especially around achievement gaps and culturally inclusive and equitable practices in education, requires a transformative leader. Terrell et al. (2018) explained that transformative leadership, in the context of equity, involves recognizing the gaps in academic achievement, such as student literacy, as inequities that are generational and correlational with students’ demographic groupings. Transformative leaders challenge

practices that marginalize students, press for equitable academic access and outcomes, and are committed to equity are needed to bring about this transformation (Terrell et al., 2018). These leaders must have the knowledge, skills, will, capacity, and commitment to understand the root causes of social disparities, specifically racial inequities in education, and to work to address them in a comprehensive and deliberate way. They must have the willingness to engage in continuous learning and improvement to build a common vision and commitment to equity within their organization.

Shields (2016) explored the practicality of transformative leadership in the social justice efforts of superintendents in the U.S. Shields analyzed the experiences and viewpoints of superintendents on transformative leadership and social justice and the difficulties they face in advancing these values in their schools. The findings showed superintendents comprehend the importance of transformative leadership in advancing social justice but face difficulties that include political and community opposition, limited resources, and contradictory messages from stakeholders. Findings indicated that superintendents use several approaches to advance transformative leadership and social justice, including professional development, building partnerships with local organizations, and speaking with stakeholders (Shields, 2016). Shields highlighted the practicality and possibility of transformative leadership in advancing social justice and the role of leaders in advancing social justice in schools. Therefore, superintendents are critical to the success of advancing equity and social justice practices and are prepared with the knowledge and skills to lead these efforts.

### **Organizational/Systems Change**

According to Fullan (2016), to transform the whole education system of a school district, education leaders must be intentional not only in the technical parts of the system but also in the social and political aspects. Fullan (2016) highlighted the intricate and complex nature of

improving the educational system and the need for an all-encompassing methodology that considers the different specialized, social, and political elements that impact educational results. Fullan (2006) contended that “system thinkers” are exceptional in leading educational change efforts, as they can “think and act systemically” (p. 116). Systems thinkers understand the interconnected nature of the education system and how various pieces of the system impact each other. They are ready to identify and address problems’ root causes instead of just treating side effects.

Regarding building organizational capacity for educational equity, system thinking allows district leaders to understand the complex and interconnected nature of equity-related issues and to adopt comprehensive strategies to address them. Fullan (2006) noted that systems thinkers empower stakeholders to manage the intricacy of progress and to grasp the interconnectedness of the different parts of a system. By embracing a systems thinking approach, superintendents and district leaders can better comprehend the difficulties and opportunities they face in advancing equity and develop a more targeted and effective action plan to achieve goals and objectives.

Leithwood et al. (2006) explained that organizational change in districts and schools involves *first order change* and *second order change* (p. 18). First order change refers to the teaching and learning portion of education, whereas second order change happens when policies, practices, culture, and resources are addressed and institutionalized. Teaching and learning are often looked to address student achievement because they are considered alterable direct inputs that leaders can control to affect change. However, teaching and learning cannot be addressed in isolation because schools encounter direct inputs outside of the district’s control, such as race, income, culture, family, and student background (Leithwood et al., 2006, p. 39). School districts

and leaders must consider those unalterable inputs when addressing first and second order changes.

First and second order changes can be implemented simultaneously with very little effect on the organization. Shifting an organization to authentically address the needs of its stakeholders, especially the most marginalized, requires centering on the voices of the stakeholders as the driving force for systemic transformation to support leaders' implementation of policies and practices and develop an accountability system that ensures equitable service for all stakeholders, and most importantly, students. Superintendents and critical personnel bear the weight of systemic change by addressing both first and second order changes. They must develop the necessary policies and practices that include professional development training, identifying strong leadership characteristics, and ensuring growth opportunities among district-level staff; foster healthy campus cultures; and build equitable teaching and learning environments for students, especially students of color, to thrive.

### **The Role of Equity Policies**

Equity policies serve as foundational documents that articulate a district's commitment to addressing disparities and promoting inclusivity. These policies often include specific goals, strategies, and accountability measures designed to eliminate inequities (Ladson-Billings, 1995) because well-crafted equity policies influence significant improvements in student outcomes, particularly for marginalized groups (Gillborn, 2005). For instance, Skrla et al. (2009) found that districts with comprehensive equity policies reported higher levels of academic achievement among students of color. These policies typically addressed various dimensions of equity, including resource allocation, curriculum development, and staff training. The researchers highlighted the importance of clear and measurable goals within equity policies to ensure effective implementation and monitoring. These policies set the foundation and blueprint for the

necessary systems changes; however, appropriate leadership and oversight are critical to success (Anderson, 2009).

### **Governance and Leadership**

Effective governance is crucial for the successful implementation of equity policies. School boards and district leaders play a vital role in setting the vision for equity and ensuring that policies are enacted and upheld (Anderson, 2009). Governance structures that prioritize equity can create an environment where all students have the opportunity to succeed.

A study by Frattura and Capper (2007) emphasized the importance of leadership in fostering a culture of equity within school districts. The authors argued that leaders who are committed to equity must demonstrate a deep understanding of systemic inequities and actively work to dismantle barriers. This involves continuous professional development, stakeholder engagement, and the allocation of resources to support equity initiatives.

### ***The Role of School Board Trustees***

School board trustees play a pivotal role in shaping and overseeing the implementation of equity policies. They are responsible for setting the district's strategic vision and ensuring that it aligns with equity goals. Trustees can influence the direction of district policies by advocating for equity-focused initiatives and holding district leaders accountable for progress (Land, 2002). Mountford (2004) highlighted the importance of school board trustees in promoting equity. Trustees who prioritize equity can help create policies that address systemic disparities and allocate resources to support marginalized students. The study found that trustees' commitment to equity is often reflected in their advocacy for inclusive practices and their willingness to challenge the status quo. Alsbury and Gore (2015) further emphasized the role of school board trustees in fostering a culture of equity. The authors argued that trustees must engage in ongoing professional development to understand the complexities of systemic inequities and develop

strategies to address them. Effective trustees also collaborate with community stakeholders to ensure that equity policies are responsive to the needs of all students.

### ***Professional Development and Training***

Professional development and equity training are essential components in the successful implementation of racial equity initiatives in K-12 school districts. These efforts aim to equip educators with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to address systemic inequities and promote an inclusive educational environment.

Professional development provides educational leaders with ongoing opportunities to deepen their understanding of equity and refine their practices to better serve diverse student populations. Effective professional development is characterized by its relevance to educators' work, alignment with equity goals, and emphasis on practical application (Desimone & Garet, 2015).

Research by Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) highlights the critical role of professional development in promoting equity. The study found that professional development programs focused on culturally responsive teaching practices led to improved student outcomes, particularly for students of color. The authors emphasized the importance of sustained, collaborative professional learning that addresses both individual and systemic aspects of equity.

### **Implicit Bias Training**

Implicit bias training is another critical component of professional development aimed at promoting equity. Implicit biases are unconscious attitudes or stereotypes that affect individuals' understanding, actions, and decisions (Greenwald & Krieger, 2006). Training programs that address implicit bias help educators become aware of their biases and develop strategies to mitigate their impact on student interactions and outcomes.

Staats (2016) found that implicit bias training can lead to significant changes in educators' attitudes and behaviors. The research highlighted the importance of interactive and reflective training sessions that encourage participants to examine their biases and consider their implications for practice. Effective implicit bias training often includes ongoing support and follow-up activities to reinforce learning and promote sustained change.

### ***Equity Audits and Data-Driven Decision Making***

Equity audits are systematic evaluations of policies, practices, and outcomes to identify and address disparities within educational institutions (Skrla et al., 2009). Professional development that includes training in conducting equity audits empowers educators to use data to inform their decisions and develop targeted interventions to promote equity. Skrla et al. (2004) found that equity audits are effective in uncovering hidden inequities and guiding school improvement efforts. The study emphasized the need for comprehensive training in data collection, analysis, and interpretation to ensure that equity audits are conducted rigorously and lead to meaningful action. Professional development in this area also fosters a culture of accountability and continuous improvement.

### ***Challenges and Best Practices***

While professional development and equity training are crucial for promoting racial equity, several challenges can hinder their effectiveness. These challenges include resistance to change, limited resources, and the need for ongoing support (Khalifa et al., 2016). Research suggests that successful professional development programs share several key characteristics:

1. Relevance and contextualization of professional development in which content is tailored to the specific needs and contexts of the educators and the students they serve (Desimone & Garet, 2015).

2. Collaborative learning opportunities that involve using professional learning communities to promote the sharing of ideas and practices and support collective problem-solving (Vescio et al., 2008).
3. Effective professional development is intensive and sustained over time by providing multiple training sessions to ensure opportunities for deep learning and the gradual implementation of new practices (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).
4. Active learning with interactive and hands-on activities, role-playing, and simulations engages participants and facilitates their application of new knowledge and skills (Garet et al., 2001).

### **Identifying District-Level Leadership for Change Capacity**

In systemic transformation, building leadership capacity is a critical component that extends from the district to the campus level. However, it is often the superintendent who shoulders the bulk of accountability for ensuring change. Superintendents are required to weave together sometimes conflicting initiatives related to district policies and practices, campus teaching and learning, and the overall climate and culture within schools and communities. Successful educational outcomes should reflect the collaborative efforts of both internal and external stakeholders in a school district.

To truly enhance leadership capacity, distributive leadership becomes a fundamental approach. Brooks (2012) delved into the advantages of distributive leadership within an organization, defining it as a practice that encompasses various situations, leaders, and followers over time to instigate systemic change. In distributive leadership, superintendents must adapt their actions to suit different situations, whether formal or informal, to influence an ever-evolving set of artifacts and tools. Distributive leadership means the focus is not on the individual leader's, or the superintendent's, characteristics, dispositions, or attitudes as a function

of shifting the focus from organizational change to individual responsibility. Instead, distributive leadership operates as a tool for engaging all education community stakeholders in driving collective change (Brooks, 2012).

As Fullan (2016) noted, developing leadership skills at all levels of an organization is crucial for the long-term sustainability of change initiatives and new systems. Consequently, the shift in mindset and the associated training should commence with district-level leadership and curriculum and instruction teams. These shifts in mindset must start from the upper echelons of the educational hierarchy. Identifying the right leaders to enhance capacity within the district is pivotal.

In this process of identifying leaders, individuals who exhibit a balance between disruption and cohesiveness need to be included in implementing the change. This balance is critical for building capacity to advance equity work. Black and English (2001) highlighted various types of leaders who can impede transformation and hinder progress in equity initiatives. They cautioned against leaders characterized as the *little Hitler*, who crave power and tend to monopolize accomplishments, thereby deflecting attention from collective efforts. Another problematic archetype is the *people puppeteer*, who gains satisfaction from manipulating individuals and inciting chaos among staff, then disengages, leaving destruction in their wake. Lastly, the *power conservative* clings to outdated ideas and is resistant to empowering those with innovative approaches. These leadership characteristics often place little emphasis on students or student achievement.

In contrast, leaders categorized as *good sports* or *synergists* encompass the qualities necessary for advancing equity transformation (Miller, 2007). They demonstrate a profound moral commitment and contribute to building a culture and capacity within the system. A synergist possesses the unique ability to gauge the pulse of the organization's people and bring

them together to achieve a shared objective. This leader balances the roles of visionary, systems builder, and administrator, effectively promoting the goals of equity transformation (Miller, 2007).

Systemic transformation necessitates the commitment and collective efforts of all stakeholders, from the district level to individual school campuses. However, superintendents often play a pivotal role in driving this change, as they must navigate and harmonize the multifaceted aspects of district policies, teaching and learning strategies, and the overall cultural and community climate. Distributive leadership emerges as a powerful approach to managing this complexity; engages leaders across various situations, both formally and informally, to catalyze systemic change; and ensures the focus is on collaboration, eschewing individualistic approaches, and recognizing that true transformation demands collective action (Fullan, 2016).

The types of leaders who emerge in the change process are instrumental in shaping the success of equity initiatives. Good sport or synergist leaders demonstrate a deep moral commitment to equity and possess the unique ability to unite diverse stakeholders in pursuit of a common goal. They function as visionary leaders, system builders, and administrators, fostering a culture that embraces diversity, equity, and inclusion (Miller, 2007).

In an era when educational systems face increasing political and social pressures, building leadership capacity is the linchpin for change. Distributive leadership is a framework for addressing racial disparities, cultivating culturally responsive pedagogy, and promoting social justice within schools and communities. As the call for equity in education intensifies, the role of leadership capacity-building becomes ever more critical in realizing the dream of equitable and inclusive educational systems. Only by developing leaders with a deep understanding of history, context, and a commitment to challenging existing power structures can we hope to achieve lasting systemic equity transformation in our schools. To summarize, building leadership

capacity within a school district is paramount for invoking systemic equity transformation. It is the key to addressing persistent educational disparities, promoting social justice, and dismantling the deeply rooted inequities that continue to affect our educational systems. Therefore, campus leaders must also function as transformational leaders within a district's capacity for change.

### **Impact of Campus Leadership**

Educational leaders must possess a profound comprehension of the interplay between school culture, community, and leadership. As Khalifa (2020) and Radd (2018) have demonstrated, culturally relevant leadership is indispensable in nurturing an inclusive school ecosystem. Sergiovanni (2019) eloquently terms this connection as the *lifeworld*, a realm encompassing the intangible yet vital facets of the school environment. Lifeworld leaders, drawing from cultural responsiveness, focus on the invisible elements of the school atmosphere, which are the informal, subtle, and symbolic factors that cement the school's collective vision, core values, and shared beliefs. These elements serve as the bedrock for cultivating a culture and climate of equity and inclusivity and are central to culturally relevant leadership.

Educational leaders must be attuned to the external factors affecting the school's lifeworld. Sergiovanni (2019) termed the external factors as the system or *systems world* within schools, which encompasses the policies, practices, and procedures aimed at optimizing efficiency and effectiveness. Striking a harmonious balance between the lifeworld and the systems world is pivotal for leadership success. While both worlds hold significance, cultural responsiveness emphasizes that the lifeworld can require prioritization to safeguard against erosion of character, culture, and climate.

When climates within schools suffer, it is not only the educational landscape that is impacted. The suffering ripples outward to affect families, directly influencing the well-being of children and potentially eroding their academic achievement. Hence, leaders with a focus on

culturally relevant leadership recognize the significance of investing in human capital as it profoundly impacts a school's lifeworld and, consequently, its entire ecosystem (Sergiovanni, 2019).

Khalifa (2020) emphasized that schools are not isolated entities, but they are interconnected ecosystems comprised of students, parents, families, and community members. To truly flourish, the lifeworld must take center stage within the organization. Culturally relevant leaders intentionally create synergy by aligning the expressive actions of the community, including the needs, visions, and values of students, parents, and other stakeholders, with the normative actions, encompassing shared beliefs, values, and the school's overarching vision (Blumer & Tatum, 1999; Miller, 2021). This symbiosis fuels growth and ensures the stability of the systems world through the leader's teleological and strategic actions. Teleological action involves setting objectives and establishing efficient systems that position the school for success, mirroring Khalifa's emphasis on intentional leadership for equity. Strategic action entails maximizing value by making appreciative choices that maintain a delicate equilibrium between the systems world and the lifeworld.

School character and effectiveness are the heart of this intricate educational ecosystem (Khalifa, 2020). School character serves as the epicenter, enveloped by the lifeworld of culture, community, and individual needs. A thriving ecosystem necessitates shared learning and ownership among students, teachers, and parents. The freedom of choice and active engagement are indispensable for nurturing a healthy school culture that aligns with culturally relevant leadership principles. However, when schools grapple with negative, biased, or inequitable cultures, a transformative shift is imperative. Khalifa (2020) asserted that reshaping school cultures is intricate, requiring a shift in the mindsets of the leaders and stakeholders. Thus, for educational leaders committed to cultural responsiveness, maintaining the lifeworld of leadership

is an ongoing and delicate balance of ensuring the maintenance of the broader societal goal of an equitable and inclusive education system.

### **Classroom Culture and Pedagogy**

Effective leadership in education must extend its influence beyond the administrative realm and into the very heart of classrooms. A superintendent's true impact is measured by the success of the district's individual campuses and, most importantly, the performance of students in the classroom. The core of effective teaching and learning lies in the art of pedagogy and the richness of the curriculum. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2009), in the seminal work *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Students* and subsequent research (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 2014), underscored the pivotal role of culturally relevant pedagogy in fostering academic achievement, particularly among Black students.

Ladson-Billings' (2009, 2014) insightful research findings included three crucial components of culturally relevant teaching. First, there is an unwavering focus on academic excellence, where educators must foster academic skills by immersing students in literacy, numeracy, and crucial social and political concepts, thereby deeply engaging them in the learning process. Second, teachers with cultural competence demonstrate a profound appreciation for their students' cultural norms while holding academic excellence in equal regard (Howard & Terry, 2011). Third, students experience academic success. This approach ensures that students can embrace their own cultural identities without feeling compelled to conform to dominant White cultural norms (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Howard & Terry, 2011).

By adopting these culturally responsive approaches, educational leaders can build a shared vision, core value set, and common beliefs that form the foundation for a strong culture and climate of equity (Sergiovanni, 2019). The significance of culturally relevant teaching reverberates in its capacity to foster academic equity, particularly among students of color and

Black students (Khalifa, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 1994). This pedagogical approach has proven to be a powerful tool in bridging the achievement gap, enabling these students to perform at levels comparable to their White peers.

To translate this potential into practice, it is incumbent upon superintendents to proactively develop, implement, and sustain district-wide initiatives that prioritize culturally relevant teaching and curriculum (Gay, 2000; Pierce, 2005). By offering targeted professional development opportunities in culturally responsive pedagogy to instructional leaders, teachers, and classroom support staff, superintendents can effectively address disparities in student achievement and curtail disproportionate disciplinary actions (Henderson & Murray, 1994; Sheets, 1995). This collective effort to embed culturally relevant teaching within the educational landscape ensures a more equitable and just learning experience for all students, regardless of their racial or ethnic background.

### **Random Acts of Equity (RAE) Versus Systemic Equity Transformation (SET)**

To be effective leaders in equity transformation, superintendents must adopt an intentional and comprehensive approach (Radd, 2021; Singleton, 2018). Achieving SET demands more than mere intention; it necessitates a meticulously cultivated culture and climate where all stakeholders, particularly historically marginalized individuals from Black, Brown, and Indigenous backgrounds, are empowered to thrive through RAE (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019; Khalifa, 2021).

To achieve systemic equity transformation, a fundamental shift in a school system's organizational culture and climate is required. Singleton (2018) described the shift:

Systemic equity transformation requires a shift in the organizational culture and climate of school systems and schools. That shift must flow from the highest-ranking leadership to and between staff in all divisions of the district. Achieving racial equity in education is

an unapologetically top-down process. Boards of education, superintendents, and school leadership executives must take the lead and responsibility for transformation processes in their communities. (pp. 30-31)

By openly addressing how racial beliefs and biases lead to racial disparities, the entire system can engage in the same transformative journey. Stakeholders can develop new understandings and translate this understanding into effective practice.

Without a genuine commitment to racial equity work at the leadership level, districts and schools often resort to RAE (Singleton, 2018). RAEs represent haphazard approaches characterized by isolated events such as “cultural days, superficial book studies, reactive responses to racial incidents, and superficial professional learning workshops” (Singleton, 2018, p. 31). These RAEs fail to engage educators on a sustained basis and do not promote thoughtful introspection by educators regarding their own positions, the experiences of their students, and the impact of race on their daily interactions.

Intentional leadership efforts in addressing disparities in educational outcomes by considering the cultural backgrounds and norms of students, educators, and communities, particularly among minority student populations, bridge achievement gaps and create more equitable learning environments (Khalifa, 2020; Radd et al., 2021). This transformation should emanate from top-ranking leadership, such as superintendents, and trickle down through the entire district, demonstrating the need for superintendents’ proactive engagement in the process. Superintendents shifting from RAE to SET can forge a path toward an equitable educational system.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter provided a comprehensive exploration of the superintendent’s role, elucidating its historical evolution to present-day functions (Black & English, 2001; Kowalski &

Bjork, 2005; Skrla et al., 2009). The review delved into the intricates of the intersectionality of racial equity and the superintendent's responsibilities and the dynamics of applying fairness and justice influence leadership (Ladson-Billings, 2020; Maxwell et al., 2013; Radd, 2021; Singleton, 2012). Furthermore, the discussion of organizational and systems change in school districts demonstrated the complexity of these efforts (Fullan, 2013; Leithwood et al., 2006). Instituting the necessary policies and hiring effective educational leaders influence the blueprint for addressing systemic inequities and creating inclusive learning environments (Desimone & Garet, 2015). Professional development and training seminars can significantly improve student outcomes, particularly for marginalized groups, emphasizing the importance of sustained and collaborative professional learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Staats, 2016). The interplay between a superintendent, equity, and organizational dynamics in a large urban school district from 2017 to 2022 can be explored by studying the leadership practices of a superintendent who led the implementation of a district-wide racial equity initiative. In the next chapter, I detail the methods for conducting the case study inquiry and answering the research questions.

### CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The issues of race and racism pose an ongoing problem affecting education in the United States (Brooks, 2012). Leaders across the country have been wrestling with the challenge of dismantling systemic racism by addressing the inequities embedded in policies, practices, and procedures. Despite the growing emphasis on the importance of equity in education, limited research exists that addresses the specific strategies and practices used by superintendents and district leadership to lead systemic racial equity initiatives in diverse urban contexts. The reduction of racial inequities in education must be systemically accomplished to avoid random acts of equity (Radd, 2021; Singleton, 2012). In the K-12 school system, campus-level administrators often take charge of reducing inequities within schools. However, superintendents are noted to be better positioned to address inequities systemically (Fleig, 2019). Superintendents are responsible for implementing district policies, including any policy for racial equity, yet are ill-prepared to lead racial equity efforts (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2007; Garza, 2008).

A study of how a district implemented a racial equity policy to achieve systemic equity transformation might address a gap in the body of knowledge about racial equity work in school districts and the type of leadership it takes to achieve the efforts. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore one district's efforts to enact a systemic racial equity initiative, with a particular focus on the perceived roles, responsibilities, and effectiveness of the district's leadership. The study examined a large urban school district's systemic racial equity policy implementation from 2017 to 2022. The study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. What practices or strategies were used, and by whom, in efforts to enact the desired change related to the systemic racial equity initiative?

RQ2. How did stakeholders involved in the racial equity initiative perceive the role of the superintendent or other critical personnel in leading the systemic racial equity initiative?

RQ3. How did community stakeholders perceive the systemic racial equity initiative and district leadership?

The research questions were informed by the conceptual framework, presented next, as a lens for generating in-depth findings during the case study. After the conceptual framework, the chapter provides the details of the research design for the case study, including the study context, participants, data collection and analysis, the efforts to ensure trustworthiness, and I describe my researcher positionality.

### **Conceptual Framework**

To guide data collection and analysis, I drew on Radd et al. (2021) equity-focused school leadership framework presented in the book *Five Practices for Equity-Focused School Leaders*, to inform this case study. Radd et al. (2021) provided an avenue for understanding the efforts of educational leaders as they work to build organizational capacity for educational equity. Radd et.al (2021) pinpointed five fundamental practices that district leaders can embrace to foster racial equity.

The first practice of educational leaders is to prioritize equity leadership with a transformational approach. This practice begins with understanding “inequities and inequalities that operate at all four levels of the system, historical, structural, institutional, and individual/interpersonal levels” (p. 10). This practice involves making equity the central focus of their leadership and decision-making and actively working to dismantle systems of oppression and privilege. The effort might include implementing policies, professional development, training, and practices that address the scope of systemic inequity at all systemic levels.

Traditional and ineffective equity training only addresses one or two levels. Also this training only addresses the historical and institutional nature of inequity and leaves leaders to determine what to do differently at the individual and interpersonal levels. Alternatively, leaders receive only a technical solution at the individual and interpersonal level. They do not gain a checklist of actions they can use to address the adaptive problems that surface on the institutional, structural, or historical systemic levels. Prioritizing equity leadership ensures that policies, professional learning, and leadership selection could account for the full span of systemic levels.

Radd et al. (2021) offered the second practice as preparing for equity as an ongoing emotional and intellectual form of leadership. In terms of emotional intelligence, equity-focused leaders understand the significance of dismantling a “hierarchical and isolated approach to decision making” (p. 36) and the importance of gravitating toward building solid relationships with a diverse group of stakeholders, including students, families, educators, and local community members. This approach to leadership takes both an individual and collective paradigm shift in beliefs, assumptions, and values. On the other hand, this mindset shift is aided by the intellectual capacity to develop a shared foundational vocabulary and a shared language when talking about equity and understanding inequity. For example, a shared understanding that *equity means that everyone gets what they need*, as opposed to *equality, where everyone gets the same thing*, is essential to leading equity transformation. These leaders work to make trusting and collaborative partnerships that foster a shared sense of ownership and responsibility for propelling equity through data-driven decision-making. School leaders utilize data to distinguish the areas where students of color are encountering disproportionate outcomes and utilize data to inform their decisions and interventions. This effort may include constantly reviewing and analyzing data related to student achievement, attendance, and discipline, as well as seeking

feedback from students, families, and staff to identify areas for improvement and the groups most likely impacted by inequities.

The third practice Radd et al. (2021) presented involved developing equity leadership teams to engage in professional learning and collaborative and collective decision-making. Equity-focused leaders understand the importance of collecting and analyzing data to identify, learn about, and address inequities in the educational system. They use data to inform their decision-making and to track progress toward equity goals. School leaders prioritize ongoing professional development focused on building equity and cultural competency as a practice of organizational learning. This could involve attending workshops and conferences, participating in book studies, and engaging in peer-to-peer learning opportunities that focus on issues of equity and diversity.

Radd et al.'s (2021) fourth practice requires building an equity-focused system by identifying needs and planning systemic change. These educational leaders build strong partnerships with families and communities through regular communication and collaboration to ensure success. They also create opportunities for families and community members to provide input and feedback on school policies and practices. Equity-focused leaders recognize that all teachers and staff members have the capacity to advance equity in their classrooms and schools. Educators and staff receive ongoing professional learning and support to develop the necessary skills and knowledge needed to create inclusive and equitable learning environments.

The fifth practice discussed by Radd et al. (2021) involves sustaining equity over the long term by advocating for systemic change not only in schools but also beyond the schools. Equity-focused leaders continually advocate for those policies and practices that address the root causes of inequity. These leaders recognize their responsibility to speak out about inequities in the education system and promote transformative policies and practices to reduce disparities in

educational outcomes. They also advocated for increased funding for schools serving high numbers of students of color and instituted transformative policies and practices to promote equity and reduce disparities in educational outcomes. Lastly, equity-focused leaders leverage their positions to increase funding in schools serving high numbers of students of color and institute policy changes at the district and state levels.

In this conceptual framework, Radd et al. (2021) did not include the community as a specific area for equity practice but did note the opportunities for families and community members to participate in equity practices. Therefore, the conceptual framework includes the community surrounding the efforts to promote systemic equity as part of understanding how one school system developed a strategic plan designed to drive systemic equity transformation and achieve academic excellence for all students. To this end, I framed this study by drawing on Radd et al.'s five practices in the context of community, as seen in Figure 3.1. By addressing issues such as inclusion, data-driven decision-making, professional learning, partnerships, and advocacy for systemic change, this framework can guide my understanding of how a school district and its superintendent effectively addressed many of the historical underpinnings that have contributed to racial inequality in education throughout data collection and analysis.

**Figure 3.1**

*Five Fundamental Practices of School Leadership When Fostering Racial Equity*



*Note.* Venn diagram adapted from A. Radd, G. G. Generett, M. A. Gooden, and G. Theoharis, G., 2021, *Five practices for equity-focused school leadership*. Copyright 2021 by ASCD.

## **Research Design**

This study was conducted using a case study research design. The case study methodology was particularly useful for studying complex issues such as systemic equity transformation, as it allows researchers to delve deeply into the context and nuances of the case being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The case study research design allows for in-depth data collection and analysis in the study of a bounded case, which in this context is the phenomenon of leadership of a systemic equity transformation in a K-12 public school system. The case study design involves collecting data composed of interviews and artifacts. This design ensures a detailed examination of a specific case, which can be conducted over an extended period to understand the complexities and context of the issue being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

## **Study Context**

UTISD is a major urban school district located in Texas. UTISD currently serves more than 76,000 students in classrooms addressing early childhood, elementary, middle, and high school education. The students' racial demographics are 64.3% Latinx, 21.0% Black, 11.0% White, 1.7% Asian, and 1.9% Native American and Two or More Races. About 85% of students in UTISD receive free or reduced lunch, and 10% participate in special education services.

UTISD is not only a racially diverse district but also a linguistically diverse district because of the number of languages spoken in students' homes. More than 30% of the student population speaks two or more languages, and bilingual or multilingual students speak over 20 different languages in their homes. UTISD's majority student population represents many races and ethnicities, reflecting the racial and language demographics of the state of Texas.

UTISD has a diverse workforce of over 10,000 educators and staff members. Approximately 60% of the district's educators and staff members identify as people of color.

However, the representation of people of color among the teaching staff is lower. Specifically, 55% of the teachers identify as White, 20% as Black, 20% as Latinx, and 5% as belonging to other racial backgrounds. When considering gender, three-quarters of the teachers in the district identify as female in a binary option.

Teachers in UTISD have an average of 10 years of teaching experience. Most teachers (55%) have 1 to 5 years of experience, with 65% having 10 or fewer years in the classroom. The annual teacher turnover rate in the district stands at approximately 15%. It is worth noting that the average pay for educators at all levels in UTISD surpasses that of the state.

This phenomenon of racial disparities is not foreign in school districts across Texas. UTISD has struggled to maintain academic excellence and adequate achievement outcomes among its students of color. UTISD mirrors the national trends of low student achievement and disproportionate discipline referrals, especially among Black students. The 2020-2021 Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR), published by TEA (2021), indicated only 16% of Black third graders were reading on grade level compared to 57% of their White counterparts.<sup>2</sup> The overall passing rate for state testing was approximately 70%, with White students at a passing rate of around 85%, Latinx students at 70%, and Black students at 55%. Despite the overall passing rate being 70%, only 35% of all test scores met grade-level expectations in the district. However, when considering racial breakdowns, the rate of test scores meeting grade-level expectations was 60% for White students, 35% for Latinx students, and 25% for Black students in UTISD. The assessment data revealed a consistent racialized pattern of performance, with White students having the highest rates, followed by Latinx students, then Black students, across

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<sup>2</sup> Texas assesses reader performance into four categories: (a) Masters Grade Level, (b) Meets Grade Level, (c) Approaches Grade Level, and (d) Did Not Meet Grade Level.

multiple school years in UTISD. This gap between Black students and White students persists throughout all grade levels and subjects.

Racial disparities are exacerbated in UTISD's disciplinary data. A local newspaper reported more than 65% of all girls who were suspended were Black; however, the Black population only represented 22% of the total UTISD student population. According to the Texas Education Agency's (2017) report on suspensions, UTISD ranked second in the state on suspension across all districts. Black students made up 55% of all student suspensions, although they only made up 23% of the student population (Steinert, 2018). The achievement and disciplinary action statistics show the racial disparities and inequities that persist (Caldera, 2018).

UTISD's Board of Trustees conducted an equity audit in 2014, which revealed gross inequities between Black students in reading and math compared to their White counterparts. Due to the results of the equity audit, the board of trustees addressed the inequities in the district through a few strategic actions. The Board of Trustees replaced the interim superintendent with a permanent hire with a track record of equity-focused practices and proven success in similar demographics. Next, they unanimously passed a resolution that established an equity and excellence department to focus on achieving racial equity within the district.

Under the new superintendent's leadership, the Board of Trustees adopted an equity policy and set priorities to eliminate racialized gaps in student performance as a primary objective. Over the course of 5 years, UTISD actively engaged in racial equity work, implementing various initiatives aimed at the community, educators, and students within the school district. Spearheading these efforts is a dedicated department responsible for supporting equity-oriented student organizations throughout the district. These organizations cater to different target groups of students and have distinct goals. The study centers on understanding the role the superintendent played in implementing the initiative and the stakeholders'

perceptions of the superintendent's leadership. The model the leadership of UTISD adopted was Singleton's (2014) systemic equity transformation roadmap.

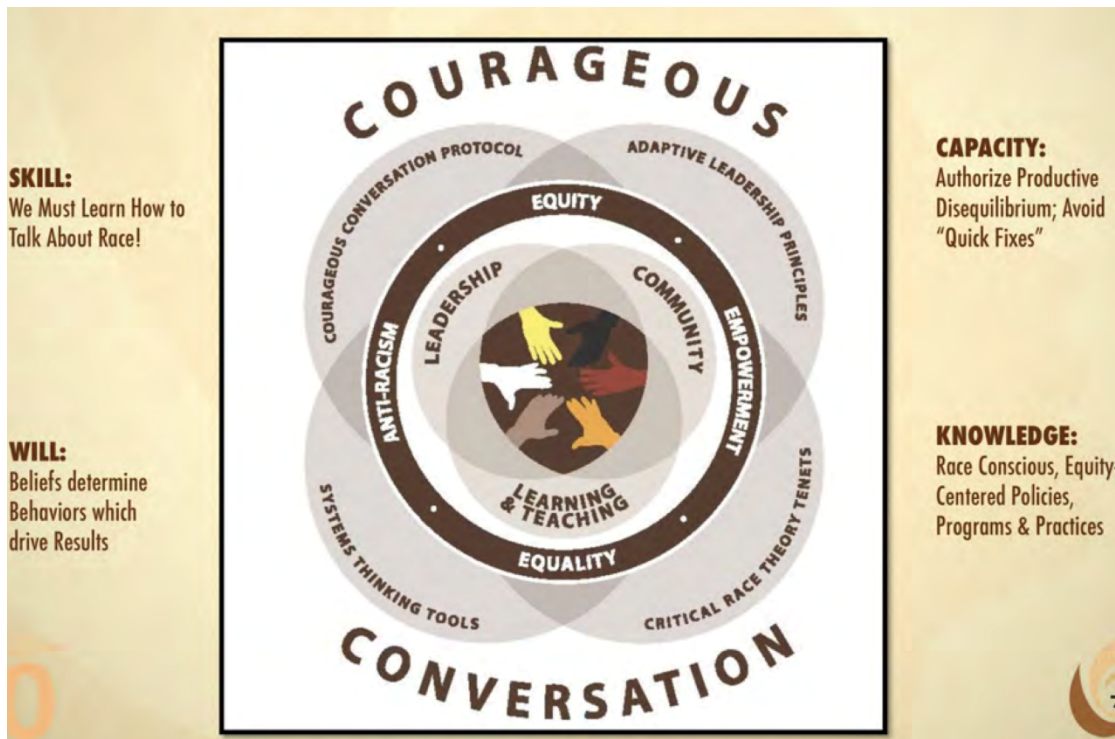
### **Singleton's Systemic Equity Transformation Roadmap**

Singleton (2014) explicitly addressed the inequitable education system and discussed systemic equity transformation as a roadmap for school districts to follow. Singleton explicitly included race in the systemic equity transformation model to identify race as the biggest culprit of inequities in schools' academic outcomes and cultural impacts. The three key parts of successful achievement of equity included (a) systemic change, (b) racial equity, and (c) transformation (Singleton, 2014). *Systemic change* refers to institutional policies, practices, and standards, as well as cultural standards, that propagate and support racial equity (Singleton, 2014). Systemic racism involves how racial bias and inequalities are embedded inside the system and policies of a system, prompting unequal outcomes for various racial groups. *Racial equity* refers to the condition in which all individuals have access to the same opportunities and support necessary to succeed, regardless of race. Racial equity means "eliminating racial disparities in outcomes for each individual child" (Singleton, 2011, p. 55). *Transformation* refers to a comprehensive and sustained change effort aimed at eliminating the impact of systemic racism. Singleton (2011) noted that transformation requires an ongoing process of reflection, learning, and action to dismantle racial inequities and create a more equitable and inclusive society.

In sum, Singleton's (2011) systemic racial equity transformation model as applied in UTISD required a sustained effort to challenge and change the policies, practices, and norms that perpetuate racial inequalities to ensure that all students, regardless of race, have equal access to the resources and opportunities necessary for success. The systemic racial equity transformation model appears in Figure 3.2.

**Figure 3.2**

*Systemic Racial Equity Transformation*



Note. Reproduced from “*Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools*” by Singleton, 2014, p. 238. Copyright Corwin Press.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

This study was conducted as a case study. Case study methodology allows for delving deeply into the context and nuances of the case through a variety of data collection methods, including artifacts, interviews, and document analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2017). I used multiple sources to ensure data crystallization. This case study was bounded by a single urban district. The study’s limited focus was on UTISD’s effort to implement a racial equity initiative. UTISD was selected to study because its efforts to address racial inequities throughout the district were widely known and recognized by local and national organizations. The focus of the 2017 through 2022 timeline was purposeful because it marked

the beginning of the racial equity policy and the end of the tenure of the superintendent hired under the implementation of the initiative. The study took place sequentially in four phases: (a) collection of artifacts, (b) purposeful sampling and recruitment of participants, (c) individual interviews, and (d) concurrent data analysis of artifacts and interviews.

### **Phase 1: Collection of Artifacts**

I collected equity-related artifacts directly related to the racial equity initiative, which included board policies and resolutions, committee meeting minutes, the equity department website, zoom presentations focused on the initiative, school calendars, superintendent and cabinet public appearances, newspaper articles, research that mentions the districts efforts, district and department websites, and communication with the internal and external communities to develop an initial timeline and identify the essential participants of the initiative. To get a broader understanding of the voices and perspectives of community stakeholders, such as parents, students, community leaders, and others, I reviewed board meetings, public comments, Racial Equity Committee meeting notes and minutes, public community blogs, and social media pages. These artifacts allowed me to develop an initial timeline of the initiative, a basic context of the intended goals, and a broad understanding of community voice and position.

Additional artifacts included audiovisual material such as photographs, social media, blogs, and other participant-created data to identify influences and support around the initiative. I created an audit trail for the artifacts (Yin, 2017). I used a virtual journal to document and organize the artifacts, identifying the date, artifact name, description, origin, attached artifact, and field notes and reflections that can be coded or used for guiding data coding.

### **Phase 2: Purposeful Sampling and Participant Recruitment**

Eight participants were selected for interviews through purposeful sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Purposeful sampling focuses on the premise that the researcher wants to discover,

understand, and gain insight, which requires selecting a sample of participants from whom the most information can be learned (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Due to the small number of employees who worked in the departments responsible for the implementation of the initiative, identities were masked to avoid exposing participants.

Over 60 UTISD employees participated in the direct efforts to advance the racial equity initiative. The participants included a mix of district-level administrators and staff, campus-level administrators and staff, and external partners and stakeholders as essential participants in the equity initiative from 2017 to 2022. The racial equity initiative was a district-wide effort; therefore, I identified eight participants who could give their perspectives from all levels of the UTISD system. However, one of the identified participants could not be reached for an interview, so the final sample size was seven participants.

The participant I was unable to interview was the former superintendent, Alford Sanchez, who oversaw the equity initiative from 2017 through 2022 at UTISD. The former superintendent was no longer affiliated with UTISD, and I had no access to any current contact information for the former superintendent. To overcome the lack of interview data from the former superintendent, I sought and collected available artifacts to demonstrate the superintendent's thinking and practices. The artifacts included the superintendent's public statements or comments and quotes from board meetings, as well as news articles, websites, and social media posts that reflected the superintendent's position and actions on the equity initiative from 2017 through 2022. The artifacts were coded during data analysis.

In this qualitative research design, using purposeful sampling was paramount to gaining information about all aspects of the case under study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This sampling strategy enabled me to intentionally select the participants based on their unique perspectives and roles within the UTISD educational system. I purposefully identified the board members and

district- and campus-level administrators for ensuring the inclusion of data from the district's key decision-makers and educational leaders. Additionally, I safeguarded the ability to collect a comprehensive set of data about how the initiative interfaced with the broader community by including external community partners as participants in individual interviews. Through this purposeful sampling approach, this research was well-positioned to generate in-depth and comprehensive findings of the UTISD case that contribute to the broader discourse on racial equity initiatives in education. Importantly, titles, race, and gender are excluded or referenced in limited ways in Chapter Four.

After receiving approval from the university's Institutional Review Board, I emailed potential participants information about the research purpose and questions to solicit their interview participation. Participants replied by email about their availability, and we scheduled virtual meetings at times convenient for them. To follow ethical guidelines, I emailed the consent forms to the participants to explain the study's purpose and the rights of the participants, and they returned signed consent forms before their interviews began (Creswell, 2016).

### **Phase 3: Individual Interviews**

Interviews are essential for collecting meaningful data for case studies (Yin, 2018). Interviews provide an opportunity for researchers' *theme of mutual interest* (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). All interviews were conducted as video calls. However, turning on cameras was optional for the participants.

Each participant was interviewed once. I followed a semistructured protocol and asked open-ended interview questions (Appendix A). This guide was used to springboard and encourage conversation while leaving room for flexing and probing (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The interview questions were designed to achieve the research questions' objectives and use the conceptual framework for understanding the phenomenon (Yin, 2017). Each interview ranged

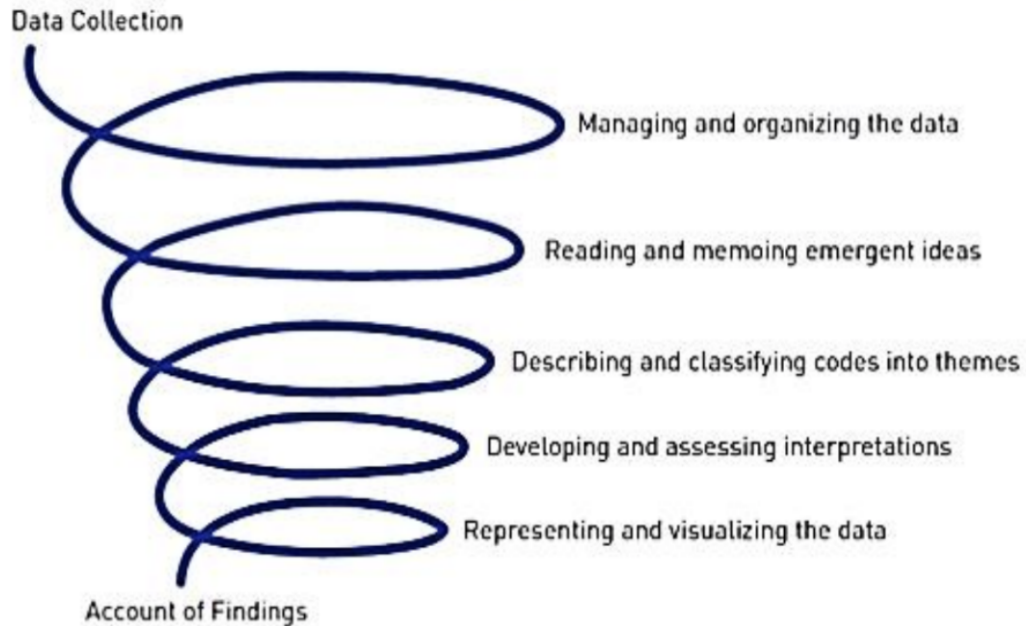
from 60 to 90 minutes. To ensure full participation, I performed little to no note-taking during the interviews, which were audio-recorded (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After each recorded interview, the conversations were transcribed verbatim. Transcription software was used to generate the transcripts. Next, I compared the audio recordings with the transcripts and corrected any initial transcription errors. These efforts ensured accurate captures of the participants' in-depth and rich insights (Yin, 2017).

#### **Phase 4: Data Analysis**

I developed meaningful insights from following the data analysis spiral depicted in Figure 3.3 to draw conclusions about the case (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I completed a comprehensive analysis of the data collected from the interview transcripts, artifacts, and documents. The documents were organized and stored in password-protected digital folders. To manage the data, I wrote memos throughout the analysis process to capture emerging ideas, and general commonalities were documented in a journal.

**Figure 3.3**

*Data Analysis Spiral*



*Note.* Reproduced from “Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches” by J. W. Creswell & C. N. Poth, 2018, p. 186. Copyright SAGE Publications. Reproduced with permission.

The analysis process included coding and categorizing the data, identifying patterns and trends within the data, and utilizing the information to address research questions and conceptual framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data analysis included both deductive and inductive coding. To address RQ1, the deductive analysis process was used. Deductive analysis is a process of working with the *top-down* approach and using predetermined codes derived from a theory or a framework (Creswell & Clark, 2007). Additionally, the nature of qualitative research demands that researchers have an open mind at any point in the study to reconsider or rethink a new way of understanding the meaning of emergent data. I applied triangulation to synthesize the themes emerging from the multiple sources of data, including interviews, artifacts, and documents, to enhance the depth of understanding revealed in the analysis process (Yin, 2017).

Consequently, emerging themes in the repetitive codes in the data that fell outside the framework were captured.

Table 3.1 illustrates the deductive strategies process used for RQ1 to organize the data according to the framework, identify keywords in relevant data, and maintain a focus on the research question (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2021). In this case study, keywords were identified within each of the five practices for equity-focused school leadership framework by Radd et al. (2021) that could be used as codes when identifying the practices described by the participants. Next, those keywords were applied during coding to the participants' responses about any correlating practice. The responses were analyzed to identify themes within the five practices.

**Table 3.1***Data Codes and Themes for Research Question 1*

Radd et al.'s five practices	Keywords / Codes	Themes / UTISD practices and strategies
Prioritizing equity leadership	Policy Professional development Training Systemic change Systemic inequity Transformation Self-learning	Self-awareness Understanding systemic inequities Adopting a systemic transformation approach
Preparing for equity	Emotional and intellectual leadership Paradigm shift Mindset transformation Data evaluation and analysis Data-driven decisions Ongoing learning Equity talk Exploring identities Foundational vocabulary	Shared language Culturally responsive leadership Paradigm shift
Developing equity leadership teams	Relationship building Leadership team Transformative systems change Collective learning and leadership Supportive decision making Multiple perspectives Shared power Increase knowledge Implementation of equity Positional and informal power Liaison and ambassadors	Equity team and tools Systemic professional development plan Learning communities
Building equity-focused systems	Equity audit Identifying needs Planning systemic change Theory of change	Equity leadership teams Equity-focused systems Equity and community collaboration Successes and critiques of district structures
Sustaining equity	Coalitions Networks Sustainability Systemic sustainability Designing sustainable systems Theory of change Theory of action	Systems erosion threatens sustaining equity

To answer RQ2 and RQ3, I used inductive analysis to code data from multiple data sources. Inductive analysis is a *bottom-up* approach to analyzing data (Creswell & Clark, 2007).

This bottoms-up approach allowed the codes, themes, patterns, and categories to emerge during many rounds of analysis (Miles et al., 2020). Open coding was used to identify major categories of information (Creswell, 2013). Memos were dictated in the margins of the documents during open coding, which involved seeking out the data’s many keywords and categories to develop codes, see patterns, and recognize the themes that emerged (Creswell, 2013). The data points were manually grouped and organized in a Word document file. This allowed the sense-making process and theme generation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The final themes, separated by the second and third research questions, are displayed in Table 3.2.

**Table 3.2**

*Themes and Final Codes for Answering Research Questions 2 and 3*

Research Question	Themes	Final Codes
RQ2. How did stakeholders involved in the racial equity initiative perceive the role of the superintendent or other critical personnel in leading the systemic racial equity initiative?	Centralized leadership versus distributed responsibility	Prioritization Roles / Job Leadership style Holistic approach
	Influence and impact on systemic change	Influence Power Support Decision-making Progress toward equity
	Perceptions of the superintendent’s leadership roles as messenger and symbolic actor	Importance Political / Politics Addressing inequities Being heard
	Challenges and criticisms centered on superintendent’s political inconsistencies	Messaging Personal connections
RQ3. How did community stakeholders perceive the systemic racial equity initiative and district leadership?	Polarization of community opinions	Support for racial equity Opposition Public discourse Racial equity committee
	Political influences	Public outrage CRT Laws / legislation COVID

## **Ethical Considerations**

By masking the names of the district and the participants, I followed Creswell's (2016) ethical compliance checklist. Because UTISD was considered a large district with only a few employees connected with the equity initiative in various capacities, it was possible for a reader to recognize and determine the identity of the case study district. I constantly sought to identify areas for ethical compliance, such as using pseudonyms for the district, participants, and any geographical references. Therefore, obtaining permission from the participants to establish expectations, guidelines, purpose, and confidentiality was essential to gaining a complete data set. I also protected the data files with a password. Because the participants' identities had to be kept strictly private and confidential, I used pseudonyms on the transcripts and in the presentation of the findings to maintain confidentiality and participant trust at all times.

## **Trustworthiness**

This case study data were derived from interviews and documents to answer the research questions. To strengthen credibility, I analyzed and triangulated multiple sources of data to construct the validity of the case study (Yin, 2018, p. 242). Member checking during the interview and after was critical to ensure understanding of language and tone. During the interviews, if statements seemed familiar to previous memoed themes, I restated the question for clarity and understanding. This restatement allowed participants to provide feedback that supported the accuracy of emerging findings and ensured I accurately represented the experiences and perspectives of the participants. I also used technology to relisten to parts of the interviews as I sought to match the audio with the text and to accurately represent the tone and clarity in the participants' interviews.

Lather (1991) suggested that triangulation establishes trustworthy data. Triangulation of multiple data points from different sources overlap or point to specific codes so that the

credibility of the study increases (Yin, 2017). I used interview transcripts, memo notes made during data coding, and artifacts from the district to validate codes from the various data sources. I engaged in debriefing often with experienced researchers during data analysis who assisted in auditing the codes in the data and reducing the effect of any biases I had on the findings.

### **Positionality and Mitigating Researcher Bias**

As a qualitative researcher, it is impossible to completely remove one's self-perspective and beliefs from the research process. Consequently, clarifying any bias, personal values, and professional experiences connected to the study process and data analysis is imperative (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This process requires clarity about researcher positionality and ways to mitigate the effects of a researcher's biases and assumptions.

#### **Positionality**

Considering positionality is crucial to understanding the potential biases that might arise in research. Throughout the process of collecting and analyzing the data, a reflection journal was maintained to document potential bias that might arise due to my personal and professional connection to the study. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) recommended that researchers position themselves in terms of reflexivity to engage in self-understanding about their biased values and experiences that they bring to a qualitative.

My positionality represented a range of social and cultural identities, experiences, and perspectives unique to me. Previously, I had a role in the UTISD case study district. My former role within the school district involved co-leading the systemic equity transformation efforts. Therefore, I held a unique position that involved having an insider perspective on the phenomenon of the equity intervention addressed. I had a direct connection with the participants and first-hand knowledge of the district's equity transformation efforts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I used this insider position to gain valuable insights from the participants and a nuanced

understanding of the complex issues and challenges involved in leading systemic equity transformation in an urban K-12 school district.

### **Biases and Assumptions**

I was keenly aware of my potential biases and limitations during the data collection and analyzing phase. The journal allowed me to reflect on my experiences and perspectives that could have shaped how I conducted the research and presented the findings. For example, when I worked in the district, I had a vested interest in the image of the district's equity transformation efforts, and this past role could have influenced the way I interpreted and reported the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, my experiences and perspectives might not necessarily reflect the perceptions that the stakeholders, such as teachers, students, or community members, express during interviews. My point of view could have limited the transferability of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To increase the overall trustworthiness of the study, I limited the impact of my potential biases by engaging in self-reflective actions and maintaining an awareness of my own experiences and perspectives that impacted my perspectives when reviewing data, journaling about my triggers, and avoiding any interpretation of the data according to my worldview (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016).

I wrote reflexive comments about the experience throughout the data collection process by taking notes after interviews, reviewing artifacts, and objectively analyzing the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I utilized rigorous and inclusive research methods that considered the perspectives of all relevant stakeholders by noting when the codes explicitly represented participants' quotes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I also engaged with experienced researchers to audit my coding efforts. I used these actions to gain a clear view of what findings represented the

data versus my biases to improve the transferability of the research findings to the readers' contexts.

### **Chapter Three Summary**

This chapter provided the details about how the case study of the UTISD superintendent's equity leadership was conducted. The methods supported exploring the stakeholders' perspectives of leadership, initiative, and the practices and strategies used to implement a sustainable district-wide racial equity initiative in a large urban school district. The chapter also delineated the mitigation of biases and assurance of trustworthiness. Chapter Four conveys the exploratory findings.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE EXPLORATION OF UTISD

The purpose of this case study was to explore one district's efforts to enact a systemic racial equity initiative, with a particular focus on the perceived roles, responsibilities, and effectiveness of the district's leadership. The study involved examining a large urban school district's systemic racial equity policy implementation from 2017 to 2022. Accordingly, the research questions of the study were:

- RQ1. What practices or strategies were used, and by whom, in efforts to enact the desired change related to the systemic racial equity initiative?
- RQ2. How did stakeholders involved in the racial equity initiative perceive the role of the superintendent or other critical personnel in leading the systemic racial equity initiative?
- RQ3. How did community stakeholders perceive the systemic racial equity initiative and district leadership?

The case study focused on UTISD, an urban school district located in Texas. I interviewed seven participants and examined district artifacts. This chapter presents the findings within the context of the research questions. For the first research question, the results appear in relation to Radd et al.'s (2021) five practices for equity-focused school leadership framework. For the second and third research questions, I provide the major themes that emerged from the data in conjunction with supporting information outlining the processes identified within the themes. The analysis of the collected data reveals the strategies and practices used by district stakeholders and key personnel that impacted the systemic racial equity initiative, as well as their perspectives on those efforts.

## UTISD Racial Equity Initiative Timeline

To provide context to the district's equity efforts, a timeline is provided to include actions that led to the systemic equity transformation plan and the years (2017-2022) of the initiative examined in this study. Artifacts and interviews data was used to compose the timeline. Prior to the arrival of Dr. Alford Sanchez, UTISD Leadership had worked with a few campuses to pilot equity conversations before implementing a systemic equity transformation plan.

- **2014:** The UTISD Board of Education approved the equity pledge designed by a national school board association. This pledge focused on students of color and was the catalyst for district programming.
- **2015:** FWISD hired a new Superintendent, Dr. Alford Sanchez.
- **Winter/Spring 2016:** The UTISD Board approved the creation of the Racial Equity Committee (REC), which is composed of IRB and external stakeholders. This committee was established to study UTISD's practices and policies and offer suggestions for improvement.
- **Spring/Summer 2016:** Superintendent Sanchez presented a new organizational structure that introduced the Department of Racial Equity. The department's charge was to implement a district-wide equity transformation plan.
- **Fall 2016:** UTISD began vetting consulting firms to lead professional development. After vetting multiple vendors, UTISD entered into a 5-year agreement with the KEF. The KEF trained the leadership and staff to reflect on their own racial experiences and allow for their racial awakenings to be scaffolded in order to address systemic barriers within the UTISD. The tools helped facilitate a productive way to engage, sustain, and deepen conversations about race.

- **Spring 2017:** After vetting UTISD’s racial equity policy through many entities and legal guidance, the UTISD Board approved the racial equity policy and a 5-year plan funded by \$1.3 million to contract with the KEF, which had over 20 years of experience in supporting large organizations in cultivating a racially conscious environment.
- **Winter 2017:** The UTISD Board approved the contract with external community partners to develop a student leadership program that would support campuses and address the disproportionate number of suspensions of African American students.
- **Spring 2018:** UTISD’s Department of Racial Equity hosted the inaugural Racial Equity Conference in collaboration with local universities, nonprofits, other school districts, and communities.
- **Spring 2019:** The UTISD Board approved a resolution to support and protect racial equity conversations.
- **2020:** The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted and impacted the school district’s equity efforts. However, members of the community launched efforts to support the area’s communities of color and low-income families. The school board meetings became contentious and political, causing leaders to retreat from their equity efforts.
- **2021:** Texas legislation passed Senate Bill 3, which was coined the “Anti-CRT” bill, to limit conversations about race and gender.
- **2022:** Dr. Alford Sanchez retires from UTISD.

### **Equity-Focused School Leadership**

The first research question asked: What practices or strategies were used, and by whom, to enact the desired change related to the systemic racial equity initiative? This question guided the inquiry into the methods stakeholders and critical personnel used to establish and implement the racial equity initiative. The themes that emerged from the data were framed by Radd et al.’s

(2021) equity-focused school leadership framework used to inform this case study. The themes were organized according to the five practices for equity-focused school leadership framework presented in this section: (a) prioritizing equity leadership, (b) preparing for equity, (c) developing equity leadership teams, (d) building equity-focused systems, and (e) sustaining equity. The participants used the term *school* to represent the school system and the term *leadership* as a generic term for district leaders or professional titles. Each theme is supported by practices identified by the participants and aligned with the framework's five practices.

### **Prioritizing Equity Leadership**

The participants' responses were analyzed to identify evidence of UTISD's practice of prioritizing equity leadership. The following themes, self-awareness, recognizing systemic inequities, and adopting a systemic transformation approach, supported UTISD's use of the practice. Three themes represented prioritizing equity leadership: (a) self-awareness, (b) understanding systemic inequities, and (c) adopting a systemic transformation approach.

#### ***Self-Awareness***

One of the main motivations for school leaders to prioritize equity leadership was based on their lived experiences of inequities and the self-awareness derived from those experiences. Several participants shared stories about their personal awakening to issues of racism, classism, and other inequities that catalyzed their equity journeys. A district-level leader shared:

I can remember being on an interview committee and being asked to sit on an inquiry committee for a high-level position. There was myself, the only Latino on the committee. There was a Black woman, a White man, and a White woman. And so, we had these interviews, right, they were coming on, and the White woman was a very influential faculty member on the campus that I was working in. And I can remember, you know, one of the interviewed persons was asked a question, "What can you tell me what this

campus is like, campus climate is like?” and that White influential faculty member replied, “We’re known as a Black ghetto campus, but we still have Caucasian students here, and they do very well.” But at that time, I didn’t have the tools. I didn’t have the structure and infrastructure, but I didn’t have what I needed to have to combat that, to say something about it, and I stayed quiet . . . So, what I started doing is, I started to educate myself, right. One of my good friends recommended a book to read, and I read, you know, the *Courageous Conversations About Race* book. And when I started learning about it, it really started opening my eyes a lot more to see what kind of a racial being I am, but also what’s around me.

While the participant above recognized gaining personal growth in awareness over the years and worked to help others recognize their deficit mindsets and the biases that contribute to inequities in education systems, another district-level administrator reflected on their origin as an equity leader:

I went to the same high school where I later taught. As a student, I was in AP and honors classes. When I returned as a teacher, it was clear that the students in non-AP classes didn’t have what they needed. This realization pushed me into AVID and started me on my equity journey.

This experience led to this participant’s self-evaluation of the historical and structural dimensions of racism and inequities to avoid perpetuating the existing inequities that affect the school system.

One campus-level administrator expressed having a sense of responsibility to others because of their upbringing:

I had always been taught to fight racism and stand up for those who did not have a voice. So, when I got into education, the values that my father and my mother taught me as a

young child became evident and affected how I tried to lead. That's how I went into teaching.

Serving marginalized communities became this participant's passion, including a leadership style rooted in their values for engaging authentically in equity work.

This process of self-education and growth allowed leaders to recognize their biases and work toward dismantling deficit mindsets within the education system. The personal stories shared by participants highlight the transformative impact of self-awareness on their leadership practices and their ability to advocate for systemic changes.

### ***Understanding Systemic Inequities***

The participants conveyed having an understanding of the equity issues the district faced in their responses. When participants were asked about social justice and equity issues in the district, they all named race or racism as a main contributing factor. A board member stated, "Get Black folks off the bottom of the list . . . in nearly every category that's simply comprised within education, nearly any subject matter, people in the Black diaspora is at the bottom of all of the lists." "This board member continued:

I'm yet to find the person who's willing to tell me that Black people are just born inferior, that we have some innate trait within us to where we're incapable of learning. . . . We're not intellectually deficient in some way. . . . Then that means there has to be extraneous factors leading to us being at the bottom percentage point of every list.

Participants provided examples of racial disparities within the school system. Two mentioned disproportionate suspension rates. One participant stated, "Really look at the discipline data broken down by race. Black females are suspended at a higher rate, and Black and Brown males are kicked off campus more frequently." A campus-level administrator said campus leaders needed the ability to evaluate this issue directly from the following vantage

point: “If you have 15% African Americans on your campus but you’ve got a 25% to 30% disciplined infraction rate. Those were some of the indicators that we began to look at and say something else that is happening there.”

The participants named the inequities that occur throughout the system. Other participants recognized the underrepresentation of “teachers of color” and the overidentification of Black boys in special education. A board member shared a sense of responsibility with being equipped with all the data that showed inequities:

I had a strong desire to understand what the actual scope of the issues were. And then to begin to put systems and processes in place to overcome . . . correct for the historic inequities that existed. So, overcoming and then providing justice or making right on where the district had failed for so long in the past.

The participants demonstrated their understanding of the systemic inequities affecting their district. They identified specific issues, such as racial disparities in suspension rates, underrepresentation of teachers of color, and overidentification of Black boys in Special Education. This awareness was crucial for recognizing the need for systemic transformation. By understanding these systemic issues, the participants could advocate for comprehensive strategies to address inequities at multiple levels.

### ***Adopting a Systemic Transformation Approach***

In the third theme, participants discussed how superintendents and board members addressed the inequities in the district. Several responses identified superintendents before 2017 who initiated small, isolated acts to disrupt racial inequities. However, a more systemic approach was initiated through policy in 2017. One participant used the term “random acts of equity” (RAE) from Singleton’s (2006) research to describe the pre-20017 efforts and believed the efforts had “good intentions” but were ineffective outside a systemic plan. A district-level

administrator described the conditions of starting the equity initiative with the superintendent, Banard, who was African American, prior to hiring Superintendent Paredes:

It was going to be, you know, difficult for [Banard] to even bring this up. We started having seminars, and we started with, we did not start with the campus level, we started with those that were writing, writing the curriculum, leading campus work, so that would be principals, assistant principals, specialists, those individuals so we started with them.

A board member recalled an experience participating in one of Superintendent Banard's training events:

They were doing some equity work when I came in, but it was very loose, and it was very haphazard, so it was haphazard and not strategic. . . . They had a trainer who would come in twice a year and do, you know, have equity trainings [sic] for a handful of people who wanted to attend, and so, they would maybe train like 20 people at a time.

A district-level administrator mentioned implementing "pilot programs for the lowest-performing student population, which happened to be African American" in response to these early equity training efforts and felt that although they were a start, the initiative needed more support and a plan to make an impact.

Participants did not criticize the previous Superintendent Banard's intentions but noted the lack of a systematic plan to address inequities, which Superintendent Paredes did provide. For example, the first practice of prioritizing equity leadership by Radd et al. warns against fragmented efforts and RAE and advocates for a comprehensive approach that includes historical, institutional, individual, and interpersonal levels. A board member reflected that the superintendent:

Brought some school board members in, and we had some really good conversations about race. They were pretty superficial. It was mostly about awareness that racism

existed within the institution, which I think everyone who was a part of that training or who was involved in that training was well aware of. But it was very, very, very surface level and that may have just been the level that they had had us go through as a school board.

A district-level administrator reflected on those training events from the perspective of a facilitator as follows:

Maybe we went hard and heavy, you know, you think back, and say, do your best with what you know to do. We were talking about racism, and we would ask them to look at yourself: Where are your biases? So, all of them came to that one seminar, [and] we didn't get to come back, which now we know, not effective.

Although the initial approach was not transformative, it laid the groundwork for future efforts. A board member noted a shift:

About 8 months later, we received an invitation from an organization the district was part of called Council of the Great City Schools. They had put together a resolution for school boards, essentially it was a challenge for school boards, to take on, to actually begin to tackle more deliberately, the effects of institutional racism. And it specifically called out a number of root causes. Well, not root causes, but more symptoms . . . and asked us to get to the root causes, so things like disproportionate discipline rates and overidentification for special education underidentification for Gifted and Talented programming. I think there were probably like six or seven different categories that fell into, so those were like the three high-level ones.

This board member also discussed that experience leading the district to identify some areas to improve. That challenged UTISD to engage in developing strategic action plans and an equity pledge. They believed this challenge laid the foundation for the racial equity policy, which is an

essential part of adopting a systematic transformation approach, and confirmed that they “signed the pledge, and the policy was born out of that.”

Participants shared their experience collaborating with the racial equity committee to develop the policy, which was essential for adopting a systemic transformation approach. The board of trustees gave the committee legitimacy and voice by developing the committee as a board-appointed committee. A board member recalled having involvement with the committee before being elected:

The Racial Equity Committee was something that was commissioned by the board as a board committee . . . so they got community members involved; thankfully, I was able to be one. So, the board member engaged the community members, saying, we have racial disparities; what can we do about it? The whole commissioning of the committee in the first place really was to formulate the race equity policy. Now, it is a standing committee.

Another district-level administrator participated in drafting sessions:

I had the opportunity to participate in a handful of the drafting sessions around the racial equity policy, but I will say, I was also a campus teacher at the time, so I didn't go to all of the sessions. But there was a lot of discussion around word choice, around what should be tracked, and around the depth to which it should be tracked.

The consensus among participants was that the committee developed the policy, and the board voted unanimously to approve it. The participants reminisced about the collaborative nature of the committee's work and expressed sharing a sense of belonging and ownership of the policy.

However, one board member had mixed feelings:

I initially did not want to have the committee. I initially was like: We need to just get some stuff done. I definitely wanted to bring people along but when you're talking about policy, I believe the board is elected to create policy. The community has elected you

because they trust you to make policy. . . . My perspective at the time was that we had been put there with a charge to create policies that reflected the vision and values of the community. And this was one of them. So, we needed to do the work; we needed to do the research. We needed to find the best practices and put together something that worked for UTISD. I was challenged by my colleagues, and I think rightly so. We needed to include people in the community because we needed perspectives outside of our own. This took a lot longer than I was comfortable with because I just wanted to get things done. But it did get a lot of buy-in, which was good. There was a lot of buy-in and still is a lot of community ownership, which is good.

District-level administration points to the policy as the foundation for the systemic equity plan that prepared the district for equity.

The participants' reflections underscored the necessity of moving beyond fragmented efforts and "random acts of equity" to foster sustainable, systemic change. The transition to a more strategic approach led to the development of strategic action plans and the establishment of the racial equity policy. The collaborative work of the racial equity committee, which included community members and district leaders, was instrumental in creating this policy. Through the development and implementation of a racial equity policy, the district demonstrated a commitment to addressing racial disparities in a meaningful and strategic manner.

### **Preparing for Equity**

Three themes illustrated the district's efforts to prepare for equity (Radd et al., 2021) as the second practice in the equity-focused school leadership framework. According to artifacts and responses, equity department leadership, equity consultants, and key district-level administrators were responsible for preparing for equity practice. The themes providing evidence

of this practice are (a) shared language, (b) culturally responsive leadership, and (c) paradigm shift.

### ***Shared Language***

When asked to define equity, most respondents emphasized, in their own words, the importance of meeting individual students' needs. This shared understanding suggests that the group had a foundational grasp of the key vocabulary related to equity work. Figure 4.1 lists the responses to the interview question associated with this theme, demonstrating the similarity in participants' definitions and indicating a consistent, collective comprehension of equity.

**Figure 4.1**

*Shared Language of Defining Racial Equity for the District From the Seven Participants*

Equity simply is giving people what they need.
Equity, today, is ensuring that students have the tools and resources that they need to be successful.
To those, who need the most, give the most; it really is just funneling resources, whatever that resource looks like.
Ensuring that systems and structures are consistent to meet the needs of where kids are and that each particular kid is going to need more and or less to some extent, to be successful.
It sounds so cliché as to say but it's coming to my mind is leveling that playing field is it took. It's because it's not giving everyone the same thing.
I know what the district was, I know what they felt they were going to be doing. I never think that we achieved it. When I think about equity, we always talk about when I'm talking about equality, but we're talking about equitable, meaning that the people who we were working with would get the things that they need individually, not to say that the other ones couldn't have it, but so that we can all be on the same playing field.
The whole equity versus equality: The way that I parsed those out is . . . we don't necessarily go into things with the same amount of stuff; the same amount of resources; the same amount of whatever . . . when those outcomes aren't somewhat equal, somewhat comparable, then we have an equity problem, right?

A district administrator who understood the clear distinction between the terms “equality” and “equity” showed a deeper knowledge of equity by elaborating on the impact that racist systems have on equity:

This idea is that racist systems have racist outcomes. If we're seeing more Black kids in special education and we're seeing fewer Latino teachers, that's an equity issue. And that [equity issue] means that we need to differentiate those inputs to try to impact that system in a different way.

UTISD’s focus on racial equity equipped leaders to understand the impact of race on marginalized communities within the system. A district-level staff member highlighted their team’s focus:

When it comes to education, K-12 education [and] the racial equity work that we were doing . . . we focus mainly on race and how race shows up, how whiteness shows up, and how whiteness covers up other aspects when it comes to identity.

Participants observed that district leaders, including the superintendent and cabinet members, adapted their messaging to align with the prevailing political climate. One participant remarked, “The district’s definition of equity has changed over time,” as has its understanding of racial equity. Despite these public shifts in the definition of “equity,” participants exhibited a consistent and clear grasp of racial equity. As one district administrator articulated, “Racial equity meant being very bold and having the conversations of looking at race, breaking it down.” This statement demonstrates a commitment among leaders to address and dissect racial issues candidly and constructively.

Participants credited the superintendent with establishing an equity department during the first 90 days of tenure. The new department provided professional development to leaders who gained the shared language necessary to address racial equity issues within the district. This equity department played a crucial role in equipping leaders with the tools and vocabulary to engage effectively in conversations and actions surrounding racial equity.

### ***Culturally Responsive Leadership***

The data suggested that racial and cultural competence was a factor in selecting UTISD’s superintendent. Identifying leaders who exhibited emotional and intellectual intelligence for marginalized communities was crucial to the success of systemic equity transformation, and the participants echoed the need to ensure the superintendent had these competencies. The

participants were asked during their interviews: “Why do you feel the previous superintendent was chosen as superintendent of UTISD?” The participants acknowledged that Dr. Paredes’s identity played a significant role during the superintendent selection. Two participants identified race and culture as factors. One said, “I think one to have a Latino leader was important,” to highlight that race is reflected in most of the student population and a need for the ability to connect with stakeholders. A second participant explained:

Looking at race and how it shows up, I will say he looked like a White man on the outside and Brown on the inside. And I think that he was able to navigate these systems right, navigate these different scenarios where he can transition from being a White man to being a Latino who is Spanish speaking.

This participant connected the superintendent’s identity with the ability to get buy-in from multiple communities. In some way, this identity would ensure the ability to emotionally connect with most families while also using light skin as a privilege to connect with the White power structure.

Others pointed to the superintendent’s experience leading equity work in other districts and yielding high student outcomes. A board member stated:

He was chosen because he was the only person whom we interviewed for the entirety of our interview process who had demonstrated the ability to improve outcomes for students in both the districts that he led at the time, where he was a superintendent for like 15 years at his previous district. Then at the district before, he had also been very successful in the department that he was leading.

A campus-level administrator emphasized the alignment with the district’s equity direction, stating, “They began to look at candidates for a position. They found candidates that

were going to support that (equity), and that was going to continue to support what they had already identified as a need.”

Another participant noted that self-identity and personal experience represented a perfect combination for what the district sought at the time, which was leading the equity initiative with both emotional intelligence and intellectual capacity. The participant elaborated:

I believe he was selected because he wasn't just Alford; he was Alford Sanchez, because he was bilingual, and because he reflected the population of the district in which he was about to commence. He had urban inner-city experience with young people. He understood the clientele that we were dealing with when we came. We're talking about 85% to 89% free and reduced lunch. I think so much of that aspect of him was the fact that he really had that combination of reflecting those families in which he was served and the expertise in education. Also, having the political know-how to be able to shake the hand and kiss the baby and go in the room and make everybody smile and be able to deliver the pretty speech.

This combination of identity and expertise was evident in the superintendent's speeches and board presentations.

The participants also exhibited their cultural competencies as leaders. They illustrated their understanding of the impact of their identities on their leadership. They highlighted how these attributes helped them serve effectively in their leadership roles within the district. A district administrator articulated this observation:

I mean, I believe race . . . everything has to do with race, you know, the way we show up; the way we work; the interactions that we have with people. I strongly believe that race is everywhere. And that's not to say race is bad, right? I think we have this stigma to say, "Oh, you can't talk about race; you're going to get in trouble," where I don't want to be

looked at as a racist. But the reality is, it's not bad. It's how we use it. That really makes it bad.

Other participants connected a more personal, deeper connection to the impact of race and racism in the superintendent's role and perspective in leading the equity initiative:

I am a Black man from the southern region of the United States . . . Being a Black man gave me both comfort in doing the work and talking about racism as a Black man.

Talking about racism, that I did long before equity was in my title. And I think it also gave me, perhaps sometimes, an outside sense of responsibility for the work going well and wanting kids to look like me and educators who had similar backgrounds to have positive experiences. When it was a big system and, you know, no individual, in my opinion, no individual really has the capacity to fix the entire thing, right like, there were moments where it felt like if I or we didn't get it right we would be fully responsible for things not being what they needed to be.

Another participant shared about "being from an African American family" as follows: One of the things that was taught to me as a young, really before, long before, I was an educator . . . that you give back to your community, and you're trying to build the community and find what those deficits are and fill those deficits. So, in any position I held, that was always in the back of my mind: That I am here to bring and support the families that are in my sphere of influence and even try to influence others to do the same.

These participants exhibited the ability to observe not only how race impacts others and the educational system but also the role it has played in their identities and leadership.

### ***Paradigm Shift***

Participants' understanding of their connections to identity helped shape their worldview as leaders. They identified data and training as pivotal tools in shifting their paradigms and informing their approach to addressing racial inequities. One district-level administrator recalled using data to drive changes in discipline inequities and described presenting discipline data from the fall semester of 2021 to a board member. The board member requested a hard copy and expressed that the data would influence their conversations and job approach, affirming the administrator's belief that sharing inequities through data can help shift leaders' mindsets. This individual paradigm shift contributed to a collective shift, as leaders gained enough knowledge to ask hard questions and make systemic changes. Analyzing data is one effective way to address subconscious and unconscious biases, which are often deeply rooted in lived experiences, beliefs, social constructions, values, and theories.

UTISD conducted an equity audit to evaluate data on discipline, academics, special education, and gifted and talented programs. The audit revealed significant racial disparities, highlighting race as a key factor in low achievement scores, the overrepresentation of Black students in disciplinary actions, and the underrepresentation of students of color in Gifted and Talented programs. These findings prompted a shift in focus from general equity to specifically racial equity. For many district leaders, this data prompted a paradigm shift, leading them to consider the impact of race on their leadership, programs, and curriculum. This shift eventually became systemic by developing a dedicated equity committee and policy.

Racial equity training often challenges a person's worldview and can produce various responses from individuals. Participants engaged in training facilitated by the equity department and the equity consultant. A district administrator expressed fears of having to challenge others' mental models around equity:

I didn't want to alienate everybody. . . . But yeah, . . . I really wanted to appeal to people. I still believe people, for the most part, come into education to serve communities and children and do their best. Yeah. And I tried to appeal to that.

This administrator grappled with that reality as follows:

I did have to learn that there are some that are not so much wanting to change. I do believe we changed some hearts. And we changed some individuals that would work with students, specifically, students of color, maybe more specifically, specific African American students.

Participants directly involved in facilitating training sessions observed that challenging deeply held beliefs tends to lead to discomfort and cognitive dissonance. They witnessed firsthand how confronting entrenched mindsets could elicit unpredictable reactions, with many educators dismissing the information and racializing their perspectives. A district administrator recalled:

White individuals did not believe in it. And they felt comfortable enough to come and tell me, "I just can't believe in this"; "I think this is dividing us"; . . . I just thought of it as White fragility.

A campus-level administrator added:

Some of the sessions . . . were really, really good. And then some were, you know, you didn't walk out . . . [feeling good] you know. Maybe that's that White fragility aspect of it. But the arguments that we saw sometimes, in particular, I know that there was a lot of frustration, and the focus on African American students versus Hispanic students . . . those were sometimes a little uncomfortable.

One campus-level administrator grappled with discomfort:

Because of my whiteness, was I able to serve? . . . was I less of a server of kids that I had championed for, for my whole career? . . . That was a little concerning, only because there was a lot of work that a lot of people did, you know, and in some instances in that particular training aspect that didn't come forward to where there was an honoring of all and that was mostly from outside consultants.

One district administrator shared the following perspective:

A lot of people were afraid [of] talking about race and racism, and I think a big factor was that. A lot of people didn't want to seem racist; . . . some people were genuine about it and really cared and wanted to do something to dismantle racial disparities in the district. . . . And at times, in reality, there was a lot of people too that just didn't care about it . . . a lot of the work . . . because of COVID . . . transition from in person to a lot of it was on Zoom. And people really just didn't care. They didn't sign on. A lot of people didn't have anything to say. They kept their cameras closed, and it's like they didn't want to address what we all were seeing.

The community partner who facilitated and participated in community training events experienced a different reality in the following:

What else I thought was really beautiful was that the community knew about [the training]. They started hearing about it; they wanted to be involved. Other people started coming from other districts asking about the work that we were doing, wanting to see what we're doing. We taught massive doses of African history and Latino history, male socialization, female socialization. A lot of people came to see the work.

Participants recognized that for a collective paradigm shift to occur, individual mindsets needed to change first. One participant recalled a quote frequently used by the superintendent to motivate staff to engage in the training and adopt a racial equity perspective for systemic

transformation: “You know the quote the superintendent would always say, ‘Student outcomes won’t change until adult behavior changes.’”

### **Developing Equity Leadership Teams**

The themes for the third practice were derived from interview responses and artifacts. The findings demonstrated UTISD’s development of equity leadership teams that included (a) an equity team and tools, (b) a systemic professional development plan, and (c) learning communities. Statements highlighting both successes and critiques for each of the themes were significant and appear in the presentation of each of these three themes. Key personnel involved all the practices identified in all three themes; they included equity department leaders, board members, equity consultants, district administrators, campus administrators, teachers, and students.

#### ***Equity Team and Tools***

The responsibility to establish the training plan and identify leaders would be assigned to the equity department leader. The equity department leader expressed, “There were several days I would ask my peers for ideas, feedback, and input on the equity work, and I would get silence.” Consequently, this participant explained how they embraced the role:

It’s good to have someone with a specific focus, only looking at equity, racial equity, and training. Yeah, if you’ve got all the other responsibilities and all the other things that come with the day-to-day, [equity] is going to get lost.

The role of leadership and decision making can be isolated and not fully supported and can stress prior relationships. This participant recalled “just surviving and trying to avoid being isolated” and elaborated:

My feelings of isolation and frustration motivated me to focus harder on the task at hand.

It became clear that as a Black woman I would have to speak boldly to be heard and bring the necessary attention to the issues of inequities within the district.

Leading the racial equity initiative's training was new to the district, involved establishing an internal equity team, required contracting an external partner to build capacity throughout the district.

Another participant explained holding training events to support the lessons in the book *Courageous Conversations About Race* and “using that protocol” in the following:

You know, I did, we did it for district employees, and we did it for campus employees as well. One of the things that I did was, this was after hours, right after the teachers got off at 3:45 [p.m.] every day, from like 4:30 [p.m.] to 5:30 [p.m.]. I would sit online and teach a specific campus—I think it was a group of 10 people—on how to have courageous conversations about race. So, that's really what my main role was or an activity that I did when I was there. I really taught people how to use that tool correctly when it comes to having these courageous conversations about race, and how they can apply it to their workplace, within their specific campus or even their district.

The external team of experts trained the team how to use tools and strategies to lead the district teams in conversations about race, develop an antiracist mindset, analyze racialized data, and build strategies to eradicate inequities identified in the policy. A district-level administrator explained being:

Forever grateful for the partners that we found. I know there might have been a little controversy. That's where I started and I could see they helped train me so I can build on my own belief and my beliefs of what we could do if we were having these frank conversations and then make changes based on those conversations.

### ***Systemic Professional Development Plan***

UTISD worked with a consultant to devise a professional development plan for leadership teams throughout the system. The equity handbook provided the following objectives and actions as necessary for building and sustaining racial equity in UTISD:

1. Committed leadership.
2. District action plan for racial equity that is foundational for systemic transformation.
3. Equity focused assessment and increasing access to disaggregated data.
4. Relationship building, skill building, and equity principles to guide everyday practices.

The plan identified district and campus administrators, campus leaders, and students to achieve its goals. Given the size of UTISD, teams were organized into cohorts over a 2-year period to ensure leader development at all levels. Not all employees would be trained within this timeframe. The goal was to identify leaders who would form learning communities and potential internal trainers. Leaders received communication detailing their training schedule, including the location and time.

### ***Learning Communities***

The leadership teams were established as collaborative learning communities. They participated in joint professional development sessions to enhance their understanding, skills, and capabilities in racial equity. These groups were intentionally composed to include individuals with diverse professional backgrounds and a wide range of sociocultural identities, as well as varied levels of formal and informal influence. This inclusive structure fostered the exchange of multiple perspectives, enabling the teams to challenge existing mindsets and facilitate transformative paradigm shifts. Due to insufficient interview responses reflecting

UTISD’s equity leadership team practices, information from artifacts and digital materials was relied upon to provide comprehensive insights into these learning communities.

### **Building Equity-Focused Systems Via District Structures**

Several district structures appeared in the artifact data about building equity-focused systems. The structures seen in the artifacts included equity leadership teams that implemented the district’s equity-focused systems and accountability systems and supported equity and community collaboration. The participants provided data to support these systems. The themes for the fourth practice were: (a) equity leadership teams, (b) equity focused systems, (c) equity and community collaboration, (d) successes and critiques of district structures.

#### ***Equity Leadership Teams***

The handbook described the equity leadership teams, whose roles are summarized below:

1. **District Leadership Team.** The superintendent’s leadership team and several Board Trustees attended regular seminars to examine district policies, practices, programs, structures, climate, and culture to identify barriers to equity and excellence. They worked to align the District’s Systemic Equity Transformation Plan with UTISD’s strategic priorities and goals.’’
2. **Curriculum and Instruction Team.** The curriculum and instruction staff, including directors, coaches, and coordinators, participated in a seminar series aimed to expand equity in schools and districts by developing and empowering instructional coaches and leaders. The professional development focused on supporting culturally relevant pedagogy to meet the needs of racially diverse students and English learners of color.
3. **Campus Administrator Teams.** Campus leaders, including principals and assistant principals, participated in seminars aimed at deepening their understanding of

- institutionalized racism and its impact on student learning. These seminars also provided support for leading systemic equity transformation initiatives in the district and schools.
4. **Campus Equity Teams.** Campus equity teams were led by each campus's principal, teacher leaders, and support staff. They engaged in professional learning to deepen their understanding of race and equity. They also prepared to develop and implement the campus equity transformation plan by examining school policies, practices, programs, structures, and culture to identify barriers to equity and excellence.
  5. **Campus Support Teams.** Campus support teams consisted of racial equity teacher leaders focused on improving the engagement and achievement of historically low-performing student groups. They accelerated responsiveness to these students' learning needs by designing and delivering intentionally planned racial equity pedagogical practices.
  6. **Special Needs and Language Teams.** The special needs and language team attended seminars to align general and special education services and shift the special education culture from compliance to equity and excellence. They focused on reviewing and reducing African American student referrals to Special Education.
  7. **Student Anti-Racism Teams.** The team aimed to empower high school students to embrace leadership roles within their schools and communities. They actively engaged in discussions about race, identity, and academic achievement. They fostered ongoing dialogue among students and adults. By providing students with opportunities for equity and antiracism leadership, they cultivated voices for change within their school environments.
  8. **Lead Trainer Team.** UTISD offered a certification process to train individuals who could lead equity workshops for staff to enhance system capacity and ensure sustainable

racial equity transformation. This team played a pivotal role in driving the initiative's importance and success.

### ***Equity-Focused Systems***

To enact lasting change, districts must consistently address equity issues and establish sustainable systems. Many educational systems fail to achieve their equity goals because they lack enduring structures. UTISD implemented programs, committees, equity audits, and systemic change models to mitigate these shortcomings and promote sustained improvement. Two specific systems included accountability and student leadership programs.

**Accountability Systems.** UTISD established accountability and support systems to tackle longstanding and emerging equity challenges. Tools and instructions to conduct an equity walk and audit appeared on the district's website. During the initial implementation of the racial equity initiative, the equity department leadership and equity consultants organized campus equity walks and audits to support the collaboration between district departments and campus leadership. According to the district's equity handbook, the district implemented the equity audit tool to recognize the following:

Major historical and societal factors in our nation impact the inequity that exists within public schools. Purposeful action can be taken to identify, acknowledge, and overcome racial and ethnic disparities between students. The responsibility for addressing these disparities among students rests with the adults, not with the students.

The audit tool served as a systematic mechanism for school leaders to evaluate the level of equity across key areas within their schools and monitor progress on the racial equity policy. UTISD identified four critical areas: (a) learning environment, (b) literacy, (c) opportunities and access, and (d) college and career readiness. The district conducted the equity audit annually at both campus and district levels. This process helped leaders streamline and analyze data to

address disparities between White students and students of color. The completed audit identified the strengths and areas needing improvement to eliminate disparities for students of color and instill a culture of accountability among district personnel.

The results of the equity audit engaged school leaders and equity teams in reflecting on data, setting goals for the school year, developing professional development plans, and devising effective strategies to address inequities. As one participant noted, “During campus needs assessments and in campus improvement plans, we analyze disaggregated data by race to identify gaps in areas such as literacy, guiding discussions on how to address these issues effectively.”

UTISD implemented equity walks to facilitate collaboration between district and campus staff, aiming to address systemic issues and gaps in support and resources across campuses. One participant shared the experience of empowering instructional coaches to spearhead equity transformations on campuses by emphasizing:

With our instructional coaches, we had conversations with them about how they could also be a voice for equity and on coaching their teachers on how they could also think about the ways in which they interacted with people across cultural lines. One of my favorites was this idea of dual language on our campuses, and how dual language became the “good kids,” and “Gen Ed” became the bad kids. And it was this cultural difference that got misconstrued, but people weren’t clear on what that was doing to kids, right, and how the way they were showing up was impacting those children. And so, like we started to address things like that.

Another participant discussed experiences with equity walks:

Oftentimes, I would see people in the building doing racial equity walks. I remember when we were removing pictures, racist pictures on the wall. I think it was one of the

schools we went into. It had a picture of African American boys with a monkey on his lap and saying we read to our friends, and they were able to take that picture down. That's when the work was in the nitty gritty to me.

**Student Leadership Programs.** UTISD made significant investments in developing programs to cultivate the next generation of equity leaders. These initiatives included:

- **Girls Leadership Program.** UTISD partnered with development programs targeting young women who could collaborate with campus leadership at the district's middle and high schools. This program focused on addressing the specific needs related to the disproportionate suspension rates of African American female students. Girls received support to navigate academic challenges, enhanced conflict resolution skills, and opportunities for building their leadership and academic capabilities.
- **Male Rite of Passage Program.** This program offered weekly mentoring sessions for young men of color to emphasize college readiness, career exploration, community engagement, cultural awareness, personal growth, and leadership development. Its goal was to foster personal and academic success among its male participants.
- **Latinas and Family Support Program.** This program was designed for Latinas in UTISD. It provided culturally relevant programming through bilingual workshops and conferences. The program supported students' families on the journey toward higher education by focusing on relationships, academics, and social and emotional development. It aimed to empower Latina students academically and socially and foster trust among participants, staff, mentors, and families.

These programs demonstrated positive outcomes in fostering a sense of belonging and promoting academic achievement for students of color and English learning students of color. Even though

a board member expressed support for initiatives like these, the board member noted the need for more systematic implementation to benefit all students requiring support.

### ***Equity and Community Collaboration***

During COVID-19, UTISD transitioned its equity efforts to address the rising inequities in the community. A district-level administrator explained:

The district's one change that they did make, that was tangible and visible, is kind of through the parent engagement family action center. The work they were doing was direct outreach to communities. I think a lot of campuses have been trying to figure out how to do that. And the district really stepped in and tried to organize that specifically for the eastside of where that work was most needed, according to data.

An external community partner pointed to the effectiveness of the community collaborations, and said, "All those new departments like family engagement, I thought that was good. And the other part about it is they were being trained in the work [equity] too, so I thought that was good, the family initiative."

### ***Successes and Critiques of District Structures***

Achieving success in a systematic plan hinges on full participation. A district-level administrator highlighted the effectiveness of training campus-level administrators and said, "Every principal has attended multiple seminars regularly, and we are now assisting them in developing implementation plans for their campuses." Emphasizing the importance of leadership, this district-level administrator underscored the value of providing principals with opportunities to engage in off-campus training and collaborative discussions, demonstrating a strong commitment to the plan.

While participation marks a crucial step toward effecting change, the commitment of these teams to alter their practices and adopting an equity-focused approach in their roles is

paramount. Specialists from the equity training central office responsible for “developing curriculum and conducting professional development” emphasized the need to “shift their perspective and integrate an equity lens” into these activities. They stressed the importance of being intentional in both curriculum development and professional development delivery.

A district-level administrator acknowledged shortcomings in the intentional follow-up and communication after the training sessions and said, “That’s where . . . I believe we started to drop the ball. You finish your six seminars. What are the requirements for the next steps? And how do you keep your knowledge up, and what’s going on?” This administrator noted that engagement at the campus level proved more effective than at the district level and attributed this difference to varying levels of accountability between school leadership and the superintendent because “not everyone felt compelled to follow through because the support and expectations weren’t consistently reinforced.”

Additionally, participants could identify accountability systems and tools but noted they were ineffective because they lacked measurable outcomes. A board member noted, “There were no goals or constraints.” Although equity walks and campus audits were used, they were not implemented systemically. The district website provided tools, templates, and instructions on how to conduct an equity audit. However, the equity walk was neither mandatory nor monitored by district-level administrators.

### **Systems Erosion Threatens Sustaining Equity**

Interviews and artifacts did not indicate that UTISD successfully implemented sustaining equity as the fifth and final practice in the framework. Participants highlighted a deficiency in establishing and embedding transformative systems necessary to enhance the likelihood of success, suggesting system erosion. Participants have noted a decline in equity efforts over recent years, attributing it to factors such as leadership changes, the COVID-19 pandemic, and

political turbulence. These challenges have hindered the establishment of sustainable systems, resulting in the erosion of previous structures. One participant expressed:

I think where we are right now is in a complete standstill . . . in limbo. And I don't know, and it's sad that we're not doing more. I think he's just in limbo, . . . new leadership that came in pivoted. I think they did a complete 360 degrees.

The equity department was “dissolved,” and “nobody’s speaking about it.” The absence of discussion around its dissolution was telling, according to the participant who said, “They no longer have a racial equity department. That speaks volumes on its own.”

## **Conclusion**

The inquiry into the practices and strategies used by stakeholders to implement systemic racial equity initiatives in the UTISD highlighted several key themes framed by Radd et al.'s (2021) equity-focused school leadership framework. These themes included prioritizing equity leadership through self-awareness and recognition of systemic inequities, preparing for equity by developing a shared language and data-driven approaches, and forming equity leadership teams for capacity building. Additionally, building equity-focused systems involved creating accountability measures and student leadership programs, though sustaining equity faced challenges due to leadership changes, the COVID-19 pandemic, and political turbulence. These efforts collectively underscored the critical need for comprehensive, sustained approaches to achieve meaningful and lasting equity in educational settings.

### **Perceptions of Stakeholders in a Systemic Racial Equity Initiative**

The second research question asked: How did stakeholders involved in the racial equity initiative perceive the role of the superintendent or other critical personnel in leading the systemic racial equity initiative? This question guided the inquiry into the qualitative data about the participants’ perceptions. Understanding the perceptions of stakeholders regarding the roles

of superintendents and other key personnel in leading systemic racial equity initiatives provides critical insights into the effectiveness and impact of such initiatives. Four themes emerged for the second research question: (a) centralized leadership versus distributed responsibility, (b) influence and impact on systemic change, (c) perceptions of the superintendent's leadership roles as a messenger and symbolic actor, and (d) challenges and criticisms centered on superintendent's political inconsistencies.

### **Centralized Leadership Versus Distributed Responsibility**

Stakeholders had varied opinions on who should lead racial equity initiatives, reflecting a spectrum between distributed responsibility and centralized leadership. Some participants emphasized that racial equity should be everyone's job, stating, "I think one is that it's everybody's job because we all have different vantage points. We all work with kids in the schools in different ways." This perspective underscores the importance of a collective effort where each stakeholder plays a role based on their unique position and interaction with students. A campus administrator added, "When you look back upon it, you know how they say, when you put something to die, you put it in a committee . . ." questioning if equity efforts are centralized would be as effective. However, other participants identified the superintendent as the critical leader who sets the tone and direction for the initiative. One participant highlighted, "I believe it starts with the superintendent and whoever they choose to put into place to lead the initiative, then they support that person and be committed." This statement indicates a belief in the necessity of strong, centralized leadership to provide focus and commitment to the initiative.

### **Influence and Impact on Systemic Change**

This part of the Radd et al. (2021) framework explains the leadership influence and impact on UTISD systemic efforts to address inequities. This theme is presented according to its

two subthemes that demonstrate the influence and impact on systemic change: (a) the superintendent's influence and (b) the stakeholders' impact on systemic change.

### ***Influence of the Superintendent***

Despite the emphasis on collective responsibility, stakeholders consistently highlighted the superintendent's crucial role in spearheading racial equity initiatives. One participant articulated, "I believe it starts with the superintendent and whoever they choose to put into place to lead the initiative, then they support that person and be committed." Another participant stated, "The superintendent has to be the one essentially . . . if the superintendent doesn't say that this is a priority, then it's not going to get done." These statements reflected the expectation that the superintendent set the tone and provided the necessary support and resources for the racial equity initiative's success. The participants viewed the superintendent as the primary leader whose commitment and actions significantly influenced the racial equity initiative's trajectory.

### ***Impact on Systemic Change by Stakeholders***

When discussing the positions with the most impact on systemic change, participants frequently mentioned classroom teachers and principals. One participant commented, "I don't think you'll ever have more impact than you do as a classroom teacher," emphasizing the direct influence teachers have on students. Another participant said, "Principals and assistant principals have a huge job, particularly when it comes to discipline, special education, and hiring," when highlighting the significant role of school leaders in implementing equitable practices at the school level.

In terms of systemic influence, the Board of Trustees was identified as having the greatest impact on racial equity practices. One participant explained, "If I'm saying greatest influence, I probably go board president [because] even if I got that one stellar teacher in my school, that's not huge systems change." This statement suggests that while an individual

educator can make a difference in their students' racial equity experiences, systemic change requires the concerted effort and leadership of those at the top of the organizational hierarchy.

Another participant explained this rationale:

Board members are so important when you're having these conversations. If you don't have their support, because likely they were going to get the telephone calls from their constituents talking about: "Did you know this?" "Did you know about that?" "I don't want my child exposed to that whatever." So yeah, it's important to have board trustees who are very much engaged or giving their input on which direction we should go next. Yeah that, I believe that's important.

Another participant added the following perspective,

It starts with the board because the superintendent may want to move how they want to move, but at the end of the day, they got to adhere to a board. Because the board at any moment can say, "No, we don't like you no more." . . . They [the superintendent] have to navigate a little differently, but if their bosses are saying this [racial equity] is a priority, they get the move a little differently, right?

The board members are seen as pivotal in setting priorities, allocating resources, and fostering a district-wide culture of equity.

### **Perceptions of Superintendent's Leadership Roles as Messenger and Symbolic Actor**

The participants' perceptions of the superintendent's leadership roles included messenger role and symbolic actor. Stakeholders noted the superintendent had an ability to communicate the importance of racial equity publicly, which set a positive tone for the district. However, they expressed mixed feelings about the superintendent's deeper engagement with the equity initiative. One participant reflected that the superintendent's "role became still symbolic," and

“he had to participate in the training and use the language. But again, he had to signal that it was important and that this is work that we should be doing.”

Other participants saw the superintendent as the messenger. One said, “I think his role was to share the vision, the mission, and the goals of the racial equity work.” Another added, “I think one thing that he was really good at was, kind of, those sound bites.” A participant acknowledged Superintendent Paredes’s boldness for being a messenger of a widely contentious topic in the following explanation:

At the time, in the beginning, this race equity word wasn’t easy . . . to go out there and call out race [wasn’t easy]. . . . Equity wasn’t really even a word. Equality was more of the word then . . . so, even shifting toward like equity, was a little bold. . . . That’s pioneer shit like in a big way; he did that. He would put it in all the speeches, he was always in front of the camera saying it, [and] he never shied away from racial equity. “This is where we’re going. This is what we’re doing.” Him, giving those marching orders. Him, making it [racial equity] a part of his lexicon. He’s setting the tone for the culture of the district all along the way. Whatever things he’s saying is the thing that’s going to be repeated. And you heard it all the time from him just from, you know, things he said about racial equity. . . . That’s what he was able to do so well, when it came to racial equity within the district, calling it out by name, being willing to say specific words not shying away from either internally or externally. That leadership style being able to be the one sitting out there on the limb like that.

The superintendent’s symbolic actions played a significant role in influencing stakeholders’ perceptions as one participant recounted:

The day after the superintendent went to a city council meeting and said “whiteness” in front of the city council: That put new energy in us. If he can say it, we can damn sure

say it here, and that makes a difference, versus if he had gone there and said, you know, “Equity is about all of us getting along” and being like that would have led to a different outcome.

This example demonstrates the powerful impact of the superintendent’s public commitment to racial equity on motivating and energizing other stakeholders within the district.

### **Challenges and Criticisms Centered on Superintendent’s Political Inconsistencies**

Politics has a significant impact on the education system, and the superintendent’s role involves navigating political landscapes to support the initiative’s progress. Despite the positive impacts, the participants expressed criticisms and challenges about the superintendent’s political role during the equity initiative. Some felt that the superintendent could have done more to engage directly with educators and build stronger relationships within the district. A participant noted, “I think, politically, he could have done more to win the hearts and minds of the educators in the district. Like, let them see you and know that you care for them and that you aren’t doing things without thinking about them.”

However, the participants criticized inconsistencies between the superintendent’s public statements and internal actions. A participant noted, “He has the verbiage right. He said the right words, . . . but systemically he was not showing up to trainings [sic]. . . . I really think it spoke volumes.” This discrepancy between rhetoric and action was seen as undermining the initiative’s perceived importance and effectiveness by the district’s internal leaders. A participant noted Superintendent Sanchez spoke about racial equity “at board meetings and maybe in some other forums, . . . but your actions also have to be very intentional when you’re having that conversation.” Another participant elaborated:

I think for systemically, him not showing up to conversation about race trainings [sic] and other trainings [sic]. . . . I really think spoke volumes to the rest of the district. The

work wasn't that important, and that's not to say that he didn't do a good job, or he did a bad job. It's just the reality, right? If your district sees you going through the work, then they're going to want to go through the work, and [if] they see you not wanting to do the work, then they're not going to want to do it either. So, you know, that goes back to how attitude reflects leadership, right? If they see you doing it, then eventually it's going to catch on because you're doing it right. You're putting in the work, you're rolling up your sleeves and getting the work done.

A campus-level administrator added the following thoughts:

I think time is what shows people what's important, not what they say . . . from that aspect, beyond the speeches. . . . I didn't necessarily see him in my trainings [sic] when we were having at principal meetings; he wasn't there. . . . I know that in meetings, even in meetings, as a principal, I never had conversations with him on that particular issue, on that particular initiative.

This discrepancy between rhetoric and action was seen as undermining the initiative's perceived importance and effectiveness.

Other participants perceived the superintendent's role as primarily political. One participant observed the following:

I think especially early on, he believed his role to be mostly political. Like, he talked with the board. He talked with the community. I think he realized that [political role] wasn't the case and that he truly had to be an instructional leader in a way that I don't think he anticipated being.

Another participant noted Superintendent Paredes's "role would be to handle the politics of this work when it comes to his work, you know, him meeting with the city mayor, him meeting with other executives." The superintendent position was controlled by the Board of Trustees, an

elected body, and participants saw “to some extent [that] his leadership was more of a Board of Trustees’ leader than a district leader.” The participant elucidated:

It’s a challenging group, and so a lot of his time was there . . . [myself] when you are at a school district for years, and the [previous] superintendent always came to the superintendent-principal meetings, and I never saw him. It’s [the superintendency] becoming more and more a political role . . . for survival.

Stakeholders involved in the racial equity initiative perceived the superintendent’s leadership as marked by both symbolic actions and building culture through messaging, but they also discussed inconsistencies between the superintendent’s rhetoric and actions that sometimes undermined the equity initiative’s impact. Overall, the superintendent’s role was pivotal in shaping the direction and effectiveness of the systemic racial equity initiative, highlighting the importance of strong and consistent messaging and navigating politics in efforts to achieve lasting change.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the perceptions of stakeholders regarding the role of the superintendent and other critical personnel in leading the systemic racial equity initiative reveal a complex interplay between symbolic leadership, practical involvement, and distributed responsibility. While the superintendent’s public commitment and political navigation were seen as vital, there were calls for greater direct involvement and support for campus leaders. The success of racial equity initiatives depends on a collaborative effort where both centralized leadership and distributed responsibility play crucial roles. The insights from stakeholders highlight the importance of consistent, visible commitment and the need for cohesive support from all levels of leadership to drive meaningful and sustainable change.

## **Community Perceptions of the Initiative and District Leadership**

The third research question asked: How did community stakeholders perceive the systemic racial equity initiative and district leadership? This question guided the inquiry into the artifacts' trends during the initial data collection phase and throughout the data analysis processes. Community stakeholders, including parents, students, teachers, and community members, demonstrated throughout the artifacts their varied perceptions of UTISD's systemic racial equity initiative and the district's leadership from 2017 to 2024. These perceptions reflected a range of sentiments from strong support and optimism to significant opposition and skepticism. The trends identified from artifacts found in reviewing board and committee meetings, public comments, news articles, district websites, and social media comments highlight the complexities and nuances of these perceptions. Two major themes emerged: (a) polarization of community opinions and (b) political influences.

### **Polarization of Community Opinions**

In the artifacts, community stakeholders appeared sharply divided on systemic racial equity initiatives. Many stakeholders and parents endorsed racial equity efforts, viewing them as essential for tackling longstanding disparities and fostering inclusivity within the district. They advocated for initiatives like racial affinity groups and race-centered discussions, seeing them as pivotal for cultivating a fairer educational environment.

In contrast, a notable segment of the community viewed the racial equity initiatives as divisive based on an imposition of CRT in schools. This group expressed beliefs about racial equity efforts exacerbating polarization among students and diverting attention from academic goals. The two subthemes for community perceptions are (a) support for racial equity efforts and (b) opposition to racial equity efforts.

### ***Support for Racial Equity Efforts***

Many community stakeholders expressed support for the district’s racial equity initiatives, recognizing the need for systemic change to address long-standing disparities. A university professor in support of the efforts stated, “If we don’t tackle the history, we have no chance of combating it.” A racial equity committee member voiced support and explained why:

“As members of the Racial Equity Committee, we will speak out against the perpetual White supremacy, systemic racism, and the anti-Blackness we observe and experience. The need for action to accompany our words is imperative. We will support our school district in conducting a full Racial Equity Audit at every school and district-wide. This tool will be used by the Racial Equity Committee and FWISD leadership to identify and eliminate systems, policies, and practices that perpetuate racism in our schools and community. . . . We understand that racial injustice is systemic and deeply rooted in the history of our country, but it must stop now.”

During a district training seminar, a student expressed enthusiasm, saying, “I’m honored to be here today to share my thoughts on equity and hear everyone’s perspectives.”

Community members voiced their endorsement of the racial equity efforts during the public comment segment of the board meeting, stating:

I want to come this evening thanking [Chief of Schools and Superintendent] for continuing to support what Dr. Paredes has been all about, and that is racial equity . . . I want to commend you on the racial equity committee. I serve on a subcommittee . . . and it’s been very, very interesting and enlightening, and I’ve been able to share a different perspective to that whole process, and I think that other members of that committee have realized it’s hard to compose something like that and approach it without some idea of cultural understanding.

Educators frequently emphasize the significance of such initiatives in fostering an inclusive and supportive educational environment. For example, at a community forum, an educator remarked, “UTISD recognizes the importance of providing students with a comprehensive understanding of the United States.” They highlighted the positive influence of equity training and the adoption of inclusive curricula on student engagement and academic success.

A professor collaborating with the district on racial equity echoed these sentiments. The professor emphasized the focus extending beyond physical school environments and delved deeper by asking, “What books are available in the library? Are there culturally relevant materials for the students? Is the curriculum culturally responsive?”

Parents also emphasized the importance of these initiatives in cultivating a more equitable and just educational system. For instance, some parents expressed gratitude for the district’s commitment to closing achievement gaps and providing additional support to underperforming schools. One parent stated at a board meeting, “It’s high time our district takes action to ensure every student, regardless of their background, has the opportunity to succeed.”

Another parent, whose child is in pre-kindergarten, supported these efforts, saying, “I want my child to learn in public education what it means to be a member of a diverse, multicultural, global society. . . . The first step in addressing racial inequality is acknowledging its existence.”

Stakeholders underscored the beneficial impact of racial equity initiatives on school climate and student interactions, although they did not observe a substantial rise in academic achievement scores among Black students. Educators noted enhanced relationships among students from diverse backgrounds and a more inclusive school atmosphere.

Participants highlighted specific programs aimed at Black students that could enhance both school climate and academic achievement if adequately supported. One participant stated:

Research suggests the students who had access to those relationships, to those connections through that program, . . . specifically geared towards providing resources for Black and Brown males, and then in more recent years, females, as well. They had improved outcomes, . . . but one of the challenges is that the district investment in providing this resource [was only for] a number of students. It wasn't systematically implemented.

### ***Opposition to Racial Equity Efforts***

Despite initial support, there was notable opposition from certain community members in 2020 who expressed concerns about the racial equity focus, particularly related to CRT and the district's equity programs. One parent stated, "I don't want my child exposed to something that I see as politically charged and not relevant to education."

Students also expressed mixed feelings about the initiatives. While some appreciated the district's efforts to address racism and equity issues, others felt that the actions taken were either inadequate or misdirected. One student remarked, "I appreciate that the district is discussing these issues, but we need more than just talk; we need tangible changes."

These stakeholders frequently perceived the initiatives as divisive and excessively centered on race. A statewide blog published articles criticizing UTISD for prioritizing "racial equity" over other considerations. The articles opposed the efforts of the superintendent, board members, and racial equity committee. A former student and advocate expressed was quoted in a local newspaper as saying, "We should focus on practical solutions, not ideologies, politics, and 'wokeness.'"

Public comments during board meetings often included criticisms from parents who felt that the district's approach to racial equity did not align with their values. One parent read a letter from a student, stating:

“My eighth-grade English teacher taught us for the first 2 weeks how awful White men are,” the man read. “For 2 weeks, I didn’t speak a single word in class. My fellow White male classmates left the classroom feeling the same way. Those teachings made me feel like worthless scum unworthy of living. My White male classmates were constantly using the pronoun “we” when talking about slavery. Eventually I had to raise my hand and remind them that we were not and are not a part of those despicable acts.

Stakeholders moved from criticism to direct attacks, targeting school leaders, board members, and the superintendent. A witness to these attacks stated:

I hate going to those board meetings, now with this crowd and critical race theory [claims]. I mean, they harass the people, they’ve gotten rid of the superintendent, not just here but superintendents throughout the country.

Local newspapers covered crowds holding signs with “No CRT” and shouting in opposition to any teachings about race in the district. Stakeholders shifted to addressing board members directly instead of making general statements about district efforts. A program manager from a conservative organization remarked, “When you have board members who support ideologies that suggest that you’re an oppressor, or you’re oppressed based on your skin color, the problem is they’re acting more like politicians than parents.”

Other stakeholders responded by urging supporters to rally and advocate for the continuation of racial equity efforts in the district. Some questioned the credibility of “anti-CRT” advocates and offered a different perspective, asserting, “As a society, we must engage in honest dialogue about race and be prepared for these discussions when students seek them in the classroom.” Educators praised the district’s initiatives, noting that they have encouraged bravery and facilitated transformative discussions. One educator remarked, “We are encouraged to

engage in dialogue with students, and that has positively shifted the culture on our campus over the past 3 years.”

A common thread in board meetings and community feedback is the worry that the emphasis on racial equity might be eclipsing academic achievement. Some parents and stakeholders contended that while racial equity is crucial, it should not compromise educational excellence and student outcomes. They cited declining academic indicators as proof that the district’s focus may be off target.

Several teachers expressed a belief that while district leadership prioritized equity, schools often lacked sufficient resources and support. “Training alone isn’t enough,” one teacher observed. “We need continuous support and adequate resources to truly effect meaningful change.”

### **Political Influences**

The district’s racial equity initiatives were significantly shaped by the political landscape. Board meetings frequently mirrored larger political tensions surrounding CRT and diversity training. Opponents of these initiatives often cited political motives and expressed concerns about potential indoctrination. Legislation in the Texas State House banning CRT in public institutions and restricting certain books also influenced debates, sometimes conflating these broader equity efforts with specific educational policies.

One community member remarked, “This feels like a political agenda being imposed on our schools, and it’s inappropriate.” Some parents threatened to remove their children from the district if efforts continued to frame students as either “oppressed” or “oppressors” based on their skin color. At a board meeting, one parent stated, “We are teaching our children that their identity is defined by the color of their skin.”

On the other hand, proponents of the initiatives contended that confronting racial disparities was crucial for advancing the district's goals. A supporter urged the school board, stressing the district's responsibility to combat systemic racism and advance equity. A community leader added, "Our children should learn in an environment that recognizes and tackles the obstacles they encounter because of their race." Supporters highlighted attempts to politicize equity by the Texas Governor and referenced the governor's proposed legislation and public remarks that included the following: "This is a significant step towards ending critical race theory in Texas, but there is more work to be done."

### **Conclusion**

Community stakeholders in UTISD held diverse and complex perceptions regarding the systemic racial equity initiatives and district leadership. While substantial support existed for the district's endeavors to advance racial equity, there was also significant opposition and apprehension. The polarization of community opinions and the impact of political dynamics highlight the intricate and sometimes contentious nature of these initiatives. It is essential for the district to comprehend these diverse perspectives as it strives to address the challenges and opportunities associated with promoting racial equity in education.

### **Summary of the Exploration of UTISD**

This chapter provided the answers to the three research questions guiding the case study designed to explore one district's efforts to enact a systemic racial equity initiative, with a particular focus on the perceived roles, responsibilities, and effectiveness of the district's leadership. The study involved examining a large urban school district's systemic racial equity policy implementation from 2017 to 2022. The themes for the first research question were organized according to the five practices for equity-focused school leadership framework presented in this section: (a) prioritizing equity leadership, (b) preparing for equity, (c)

developing equity leadership teams, (d) building equity-focused systems, and (e) sustaining equity. First, the three themes represented prioritizing equity leadership were: (a) self-awareness, (b) understanding systemic inequities, and (c) adopting a systemic transformation approach. Second, for preparing for equity practice, the three themes were: (a) shared language, (b) culturally responsive leadership, and (c) paradigm shift. The findings demonstrated the third practice in UTISD's development of equity leadership teams that included (a) an equity team and tools, (b) a systemic professional development plan, and (c) learning communities. The themes for the fourth practice were: (a) equity leadership teams, (b) equity focused systems, (c) equity and community collaboration, (d) successes and critiques of district structures. For the fifth practice of equity sustainability, the theme of systems erosion threatens sustainability emerged.

The themes for the second research question addressed the perceptions of stakeholders in a systemic racial equity initiative. These four themes explored the following: (a) centralized leadership versus distributed responsibility, (b) influence and impact on systemic change, (c) perceptions of the superintendent's leadership roles as messenger and symbolic actor, and (d) challenges and criticisms centered on superintendent's political inconsistencies. Only the influence and impact on systemic change theme produced subthemes for this research question, which were (a) influence of the superintendent and (b) impact on systemic change by stakeholders.

Finally, two themes for the third research question explored community perceptions of the initiative and district leadership. First, the polarization of community opinions theme included subthemes of support for racial equity efforts and opposition to racial equity efforts. Second, the theme of political influences reflected that the district's racial equity initiatives were significantly shaped by the political landscape that mirrored the state's larger political tensions

surrounding CRT and diversity training. Chapter Five provides a conclusion to this exploration with discussions and recommendations.

## CHAPTER FIVE: IMPLICATIONS, REFLECTIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this case study was to explore one district's efforts to enact a systemic racial equity initiative, focusing on the perceived roles, responsibilities, and effectiveness of the district's leadership. By examining UTISD's equity policy implementation from 2017 to 2022, this study aimed to shed light on the practices and strategies used by district leaders to promote racial equity and the perceptions of various stakeholders regarding these efforts. Chapter Four provided the thematic findings that answered the following research questions:

- RQ1. What practices or strategies were used, and by whom, in efforts to affect the desired change pertinent to the systemic racial equity initiative?
- RQ2. How did stakeholders involved in the racial equity initiative perceive the role of the superintendent or other critical personnel in leading the systemic racial equity initiative?
- RQ3. How did community stakeholders perceive the systemic racial equity initiative and district leadership?

The implications of this study are particularly pertinent at a time when public education faces fierce political opposition. During the design and conduct of this case study, state and local laws in Texas began prohibiting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training and departments in public higher education institutions, banned books and parts of history, and reduced funding to public school districts.

Free speech has been chilled as the privilege to have conversations about racial inequities in schools has been removed and now feels taboo, a stark contrast to just 5 years ago when such equity efforts were celebrated for having a transformative impact. Policy proposals like Project 2025 by the Heritage Foundation (2023) not only suggest the elimination of equity efforts but also challenge the very institution of public education itself. Every participant I interviewed

echoed this sense of regression in public education. Therefore, this case study is crucial for analyzing systemic equity efforts to identify best practices, necessary leadership qualities, and lessons learned to prepare educational leaders for the battle to preserve public education.

The conceptual frameworks of this study account for the best practices needed for leaders to implement effective initiatives and provide a systemic framework for transformation. Radd et al.'s (2021) five practices for equity-focused school leadership framework outlined best practices for developing and implementing an equity initiative centered on antiracism. Singleton's (2014) model for systemic racial equity transformation allows districts to guide systemic change holistically. In short, school leaders must be developed and positioned to implement best practices for equity within a system governed by racial equity and antiracist policies. The findings supported these models as valid tools for ensuring racial equity in public education.

### **Discussion of Equity Practices and Systemic Models**

Organizing RQ1 according to the Radd et al. (2021) framework was not intended to be evaluative. However, it offered a systematic method to organize the practices and strategies utilized by UTISD, and the exploration revealed them in a manner that would be accessible for leaders seeking research-based best practices and models for future initiatives. This section discusses relevant connections between the RQ1 findings and Radd et al.'s framework. I also note important factors that appeared or did not appear in the findings regarding developing, implementing, and leading a systemic racial equity initiative.

### **Findings and Framework Integration**

Radd et al.'s (2021) five practices for equity-focused school leadership framework provided a valuable lens through which to identify the leadership practices within UTISD. This framework emphasizes the importance of prioritizing equity, preparing for equity, developing equity leadership teams, building equity-focused systems, and sustaining equity efforts.

### ***Prioritizing Equity Leadership***

Guided by Radd et al.'s (2021) equity-focused school leadership framework, this study highlighted the critical roles of self-awareness, awareness of systemic inequities, and strategic, comprehensive planning play when prioritizing equity leadership in education.

**Self-Aware Leaders.** Leaders must engage in self-reflection and awareness. It's a vital component when leading a racial equity initiative in a K-12 school system. These elements foster leaders' ability to recognize their own biases, understand systemic inequities, and develop a deep commitment to equity work rather than perpetuating disparities (Khalifa et al., 2016). Self-reflection helps leaders to critically evaluate their actions, attitudes, and the impact of their decisions on marginalized communities (Singleton & Linton, 2006). Awareness allows them to comprehend the historical and structural dimensions of racism that affect their school system. This dual focus ensures that leaders do not perpetuate existing inequities and are instead equipped to implement transformative changes that address root causes rather than symptoms (Shields, 2016). By promoting a culture of continuous learning and self-examination, leaders can build trust, model vulnerability, and inspire others to engage authentically in equity work, thereby driving sustainable and meaningful change within their educational environments.

**Understanding Systemic Inequities.** Understanding systemic racial inequities enables leaders to dismantle discriminatory structures and promote inclusive environments (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Singleton & Linton, 2006). This comprehension enables leaders to identify and dismantle the pervasive structures and practices that perpetuate racial disparities. Leaders who are well-versed in systemic inequities can better address the root causes of inequitable outcomes rather than merely treating the symptoms (Mayfield & Garrison-Wade, 2015; Paris, 2012). This knowledge empowers them to implement strategic and transformative changes that promote fairness and inclusion at all levels of the educational system. This awareness also enhances

leaders' ability to advocate for necessary policy changes and resource allocation that directly address these inequities, ensuring a more equitable educational experience for all students.

**Adopting a Systemic Transformation Approach.** Adopting a systemic approach ensures comprehensive integration of equity initiatives throughout the educational system, promoting sustainable change and collective responsibility among stakeholders (Fullan, 2016). Effective equity leadership thus entails a commitment to understanding and addressing systemic inequities while mobilizing stakeholders towards equity and inclusion goals (Leithwood et al., 2019). This approach ensures that equity initiatives are comprehensive and integrated into every aspect of the school system rather than being isolated efforts. A systemic plan helps in identifying and addressing the root causes of racial inequities, which are often deeply embedded in the policies, practices, and cultural norms of the institution (Fullan, 2016).

By taking a systemic approach, equity leaders can ensure that changes are sustainable and impactful rather than superficial. It also facilitates the alignment of resources, professional development, and accountability measures with the overarching goals of racial equity. Furthermore, a systemic plan encourages collective responsibility among all stakeholders—administrators, teachers, students, and the community—creating a unified and coordinated effort to dismantle inequities (Skrla et al., 2009). This holistic strategy is essential for fostering an environment where all students have opportunities to succeed, thereby truly transforming the educational landscape to be more inclusive and equitable (Beard, 2012; Bird et al., 2013; Fullan, 2006; Leithwood et al., 2019; Water et al., 2003).

### ***Preparing for Equity***

**Shared Language.** Shared language is essential when leading a racial equity initiative in a K-12 school system, as emphasized in Radd et al.'s (2021) five practices of equity school leadership. Having a common vocabulary allows all stakeholders—teachers, administrators,

students, and community members—to communicate effectively and consistently about equity issues. It ensures that everyone is on the same page, reducing misunderstandings and misinterpretations that can derail progress. Shared language fosters a collective understanding of key concepts such as equity, privilege, bias, and systemic racism, which is crucial for building a unified approach to addressing these issues. It also enables the establishment of clear goals and benchmarks, facilitating more effective training, policy-making, and implementation of equity strategies (Khalifa et al., 2016; Singleton, 2012). Furthermore, a shared language empowers individuals to engage in meaningful and courageous conversations about race and equity, which are necessary for driving systemic change. By cultivating a common linguistic framework, equity leaders can create a more cohesive and inclusive environment that supports sustained and impactful transformation across the entire school system (Radd et al., 2021; Skrla et al., 2009).

**Culturally Responsive Leadership.** Identifying emotionally intelligent and intellectually capable leaders is crucial when leading a racial equity initiative in a K-12 school system (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014). Emotionally intelligent leaders possess the empathy, self-awareness, and interpersonal skills necessary to navigate the sensitive and often challenging discussions around race and equity (Khalifa, 2020). They can build trust, foster inclusive environments, and motivate others to engage in the difficult work of addressing systemic inequities (Singleton, 1994).

Intellectual leaders, on the other hand, bring the critical thinking, analytical skills, and knowledge required to understand the complex nature of systemic racism and to develop effective strategies to combat it. They are adept at using data to identify disparities, set goals, and measure progress. Together, these qualities enable leaders to not only connect with diverse stakeholders on an emotional level but also to drive systemic change through informed decision-making and strategic planning. This dual capacity ensures that equity initiatives are both heartfelt

and effective, leading to sustainable transformation within the school system (Radd, 2021; Singleton, 2012).

**Paradigm Shift.** An individual and collective paradigm shift is essential when developing a system's capacity to withstand change. Individual paradigm shifts involve leaders and educators recognizing and confronting their own biases, beliefs, and behaviors related to race (Gooden, 2012). This self-awareness is critical because it allows individuals to understand how their personal perspectives can influence their interactions and decision-making processes within the school system (Ezzani, 2021). When individuals shift their mindsets, they are better equipped to implement equitable practices and challenge systemic inequities.

Collective paradigm shifts, on the other hand, occur when the entire school community—administrators, teachers, students, and parents—aligns its understanding and approaches to racial equity (Frattura & Capper, 2007). This shared commitment is necessary for creating a cohesive and supportive environment where systemic changes can take root and flourish (Allen & Liou, 2019). A collective shift ensures that equity is not just an individual effort but a unified, school-wide initiative that addresses disparities comprehensively. It fosters a culture of continuous learning, collaboration, and accountability, which is vital for sustaining long-term equity transformations. By achieving both individual and collective paradigm shifts, school systems can effectively dismantle entrenched inequities and create inclusive, supportive learning environments for all students.

### ***Developing Equity Leadership Teams***

**Equity Team and Tools.** Developing an equity team and equity tools is essential to the growth of equity efforts throughout the system (Honig & Honsa, 2020). An equity team, composed of diverse stakeholders such as administrators, teachers, students, and community members, serves as the backbone for driving and sustaining equity efforts (Khalifa, 2012; Miller,

2007). This team is tasked with monitoring the vision, goals, and strategies for the initiative, ensuring that equity is prioritized and systematically addressed throughout the district. By involving a broad range of perspectives, the equity team fosters inclusivity and ensures that the voices of all community members, especially those from marginalized groups, are heard and considered in decision-making processes (Khalifa, 2012).

Equity tools, such as data collection instruments, equity audits, and professional development resources, provide the necessary infrastructure to support the work of the equity team. These tools enable the team to assess current practices, identify disparities, and track progress toward equity goals (Anderson et al., 2007). For instance, equity audits help uncover systemic inequities in areas like discipline, special education, and gifted programs, thereby informing targeted interventions.

Developing a systemic professional development plan equips educators with the knowledge and skills needed to implement equity-focused strategies effectively. A well-structured professional development plan ensures that all educators and staff members are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to understand and address systemic racial inequities effectively (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). It provides ongoing training and support, helping educators to develop a deep understanding of racial equity concepts, unconscious biases, and culturally responsive teaching practices (Garet et al., 2001). This continuous learning process fosters an environment where staff can reflect on their own practices, challenge deeply held beliefs, and adopt new strategies that promote equity.

**Systemic Professional Development Plan.** A professional development plan creates consistency across the district, ensuring that all staff members share a common language and understanding of equity (Staats, 2016). This shared foundation is crucial for building a cohesive approach to equity work, where everyone is aligned and working towards the same goals

(Leithwood et al., 2006). By systematically developing the capacity of educators and leaders, the plan also helps to sustain the momentum of equity initiatives, making it more likely that these efforts will lead to meaningful, long-term change (Radd et al., 2021). It transforms individual mindsets and practices, contributing to a collective paradigm shift that is necessary for systemic transformation (Singleton, 2006). Overall, a comprehensive professional development plan is a critical component of successful racial equity initiatives, providing the structure and resources needed to create equitable and inclusive learning environments for all students (Fullan, 2016). Together, the equity team and tools create a robust framework that not only guides the initiative but also ensures accountability and continuous improvement. This comprehensive approach is essential for creating lasting, systemic change that promotes equity and excellence for all students.

**Learning Communities.** Learning communities facilitate ongoing dialogue, collaboration, and shared learning among educators, administrators, students, and community members. This approach ensures that diverse perspectives are heard and valued, leading to more informed decision-making and culturally responsive practices within the school environment (Black & English, 1997). By creating inclusive learning communities, leaders can cultivate a collective commitment to equity, address systemic barriers, and promote social justice in education (Brooks, 2012). This collaborative approach not only enhances the effectiveness of equity initiatives but also fosters a supportive and empowering school climate where all individuals feel respected and included.

### ***Building Equity-Focused Systems***

**Equity Leadership Teams and Equity-Focused Systems.** These efforts support accountability systems and are crucial to the future sustainability of a racial equity initiative in a K-12 school system. Accountability systems provide a framework for monitoring progress,

evaluating outcomes, and ensuring that equity goals are systematically integrated into all aspects of the educational process but only with appropriate leadership and guidance (Leithwood et al., 2006). Participants acknowledged the importance of establishing clear metrics, benchmarks, and reporting mechanisms for tracking the impact of their initiatives, identifying areas needing improvement, and celebrating successes. These systems not only hold stakeholders accountable for implementing equitable practices but also foster transparency and trust within the school community. They also enable leaders to adjust strategies based on data-driven insights, promote continuous improvement, and sustain long-term commitment to achieving racial equity in education (Jimerson, 2014). By embedding accountability within the initiative, leaders demonstrate their commitment to equity and empower stakeholders to actively contribute to creating inclusive and just learning environments for all students (Fullan, 2006).

These equity-focused systems meant investing in student leadership programs, which were considered essential to building a culture of belonging for marginalized student groups in the district. These programs empowered students to actively participate in shaping their educational environment and fostered students' sense of ownership and responsibility for equity goals. By engaging students as leaders, schools promoted inclusivity and amplified student voices, ensuring that diverse perspectives were represented in decision-making processes. Student leadership programs also cultivated critical thinking, empathy, and advocacy skills among participants, equipping them to champion equity both within the school community and beyond. Additionally, these programs contributed to a more democratic and participatory school culture, where students gained agency in the development and implementation of policies and practices to promote fairness, justice, and equity for all learners. By nurturing student leadership in equity initiatives, schools not only enhance the educational experience but also prepare students to become active agents of positive change in society.

**Equity and Community Collaborations.** Collaboration to merge equity efforts with community needs is critical to building lasting relationships with families. Collaboration strengthens partnerships between schools, families, community organizations, and local stakeholders, fostering collective action toward achieving equitable outcomes for all students (Sergiovanni, 2019). By engaging diverse community perspectives and resources, schools can better understand and address the unique needs and challenges faced by students from different backgrounds. Collaboration promotes culturally responsive practices, enhances community trust, and ensures that equity initiatives are relevant and sustainable over time (Khalifa, 2020). Moreover, involving community members in decision-making processes promotes accountability and transparency, as stakeholders collectively work towards dismantling systemic barriers and promoting inclusive educational environments. Within strong equity-focused collaborations, school leaders demonstrate a commitment to shared responsibility and solidarity in advancing social justice and equity in education.

### ***Systems Erosion Threatens Sustaining Equity***

It is not enough to implement initial racial equity changes. Ongoing equity efforts are needed to embed equity into the fabric of school culture, and policies are required for the survival of the initiative (Singleton, 2018). Without authentic evaluations and accountability measures, any racial equity initiative will experience erosion. Therefore, racial equity interventions require continuous progress monitoring, evaluations of the impact of initiative efforts, and necessary adjustments to ensure long-term sustainability. Moreover, maintaining community collaborations is essential for upholding collective commitment to equity goals. By nurturing relationships with diverse stakeholders, schools can leverage community resources, insights, and support to address systemic inequities effectively (Miller, 2021). Additionally, sustaining equity requires vigilance against the erosion of progress, ensuring that policies and

practices consistently promote fairness and inclusion. By prioritizing sustainability and community engagement, school leaders uphold their responsibility to create and maintain equitable learning environments where all students can thrive.

### **Singleton’s Systemic Equity Transformation Model**

UTISD collaborated with a consultant who used Singleton’s (2014) systemic equity transformation model to assist in achieving equity. The findings support the applicability of the transformation model in initiatives. I identified model components in the district’s efforts to address primary factors contributing to inequities in academic outcomes and cultural impacts within schools. The three key components of successful equity achievement are (a) systemic change, (b) racial equity, and (c) transformation.

### **Systemic Change**

UTISD adopted a racial equity policy to address racial inequities within the district, and this policy remains in effect at the time of this report. The district conducted several equity audits that led to significant policy changes, such as outlawing the suspension of kindergarten, first-, second-, and third-grade students. However, these audits revealed systemic erosion. Despite the policy’s continuation, critical structures like the equity department, equity teams, and leadership have been dissolved, indicating a lack of sustainable systemic support for the racial equity initiative (Leithwood et al., 2006).

### **Racial Equity**

According to the case study, UTISD implemented programs designed to provide students and families from marginalized communities with access to essential resources. Initiatives such as student leadership and rites of passage programs offered mentorship, tutoring, and college and career readiness support to Black and Brown students. These programs aimed to “eliminate racial disparities in outcomes for each individual child” (Singleton, 2011, p. 55). Despite their success,

evidenced by improved attendance, reduced disciplinary actions, and higher college acceptance rates, participants expressed concerns about the sustainability of these programs due to changes in school board leadership, insufficient resources, and a lack of systemic embedding across the district.

### **Transformation**

The case study data did not show evidence of comprehensive transformation. According to Singleton (2011), transformation involves a sustained and comprehensive change effort to eliminate the impact of systemic racism. Participants noted that the overarching equity initiative no longer existed in a systematic form. Although fragments of the effort persisted in some programs and policies, these remnants were reminiscent of the RAE seen in the district's earlier, less coordinated racial equity efforts that appeared more random before the 2017 initiative that had the five necessary practices (Radd et al., 2021; Singleton, 2011). The absence of systematic leadership and a cohesive strategy has hindered the long-term impact of the district's racial equity initiative.

### **Recommendations For Superintendents and Leaders Engaging in Systemic Equity**

#### **Transformation**

The findings provided some insight into ways leaders can successfully lead a racial equity initiative. The following recommendations were influenced by the stakeholders' perceptions of leadership and best practices outlined by Radd et al.'s (2021) framework during the study.

#### **Authentic Leadership**

Superintendents play a critical role in leading systemic equity transformations. Authentic leadership is foundational to this process. To foster trust and credibility, superintendents must embody the principles they advocate for. This means consistently demonstrating a commitment

to equity in their actions and decisions, ensuring that their leadership style is inclusive, transparent, and empathetic. Authentic leaders inspire and motivate their teams by genuinely engaging with the issues of racial equity and showing a personal investment in the success of the initiatives. Furthermore, understanding their own identities, especially racial identity, is crucial. This self-awareness helps superintendents grasp the roles that race and racism play in their leadership, allowing them to address these issues more effectively and authentically.

### **Practice What You Preach**

Effective superintendents practice what they preach (Ladson-Billings, 1995), which entails leading by example and ensuring that their behavior aligns with the district's equity goals. For instance, if a superintendent emphasizes the importance of professional development on equity issues, they should also participate in these training sessions (Desimone et al., 2015). This emphasis demonstrates a genuine commitment to the cause and sets a precedent for the rest of the district. By walking the talk, superintendents can cultivate a culture of accountability and integrity, which is crucial for the success of equity initiatives.

### **Monitor and Evaluate Initiatives**

Implementing robust mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating equity initiatives is essential for identifying areas for improvement and celebrating successes. Superintendents should establish clear metrics and benchmarks to assess the progress of equity initiatives. Regular evaluations can help identify gaps, highlight effective practices, and ensure that the initiatives are making a tangible impact (Leithwood et al., 2006). Celebrating successes, no matter how small, can motivate staff and reinforce the importance of the work. Additionally, transparent reporting on the progress and outcomes of equity initiatives can build trust and demonstrate accountability to stakeholders.

## **Policy and Practice Alignment**

A key aspect of systemic equity transformation is aligning policy and practice. Superintendents must ensure that the district's policies are not only well-crafted but also effectively implemented at all levels. This alignment requires ongoing collaboration between governance structures and district leaders to outline clear inputs, outputs, and desired outcomes. Regular reviews and adjustments to both policy and practice are necessary to maintain alignment and responsiveness to emerging needs and challenges (Skrla et al., 2009). This cohesive approach ensures that all district actions contribute toward the overarching equity goals, providing a clear roadmap for all stakeholders.

## **Build an Accountability Structure**

Creating a centralized accountability and distributed responsibility system is crucial. During the study, participants questioned if an equity department hindered the initiative's success. This reflects a broader debate on responsibility versus accountability. One board member's insight highlighted the importance of differentiating between the two. Accountability involves tying the work to deliverables, action steps, and goals, providing a standard for measuring progress. However, everyone is responsible for their part of the work (Fullan, 2016).

Superintendents should ensure that there is a clear system in place to tie equity work to specific deliverables, action steps, and goals. A centralized accountability structure offers transparency and clarity, making it clear who is responsible for what aspects of the equity initiatives. Superintendents must monitor and evaluate progress based on this system, ensuring that all staff members understand their roles and responsibilities (Leithwood et al., 2006). By differentiating between responsibility and accountability, superintendents can foster a culture where everyone is committed to equity goals and understands their part in achieving them.

## **Resistance to Political Influences**

Racial equity initiatives often challenge dominant power structures, making them susceptible to political pressures. Superintendents must be prepared to resist these influences, maintaining a steadfast commitment to the initiative's goals. This involves cultivating strong relationships with stakeholders, building coalitions, and developing strategies to counteract opposition. Superintendents should be aware of potential political challenges and prepared to address them proactively (Jones & Jones, 2022). By maintaining a clear and consistent focus on the goals of the equity initiatives, superintendents can safeguard their progress and ensure that the work remains on track.

## **Limitations**

Due to time constraints and other factors, it was not possible to interview the superintendent directly. This limitation might have impacted the depth of insights gained from one leader's perspectives. Even though the study's findings are based on a limited number of interviews and might not have fully captured the diversity of stakeholder experiences and perceptions, it is important to acknowledge that the findings of this study are specific to the UTISD context and may not be generalizable to other districts. Future researchers should consider using larger sample sizes and including multiple districts to enhance the transferability of their findings.

## **Suggestions for Further Inquiry**

This study was conducted as a single case study focusing on one large urban school district's efforts to enact a systemic racial equity initiative. While it provides valuable insights, its scope is limited to the perspectives of a few informants and excludes the superintendent's viewpoint, which is a critical omission. Consequently, this study cannot be representative of all districts. Therefore, researchers should explore three important areas.

First, future researchers could survey superintendents leading systemic equity initiatives about their leadership strategies and decision-making structures. Superintendents have a pivotal role in setting the equity vision, securing needed resources, and guiding their districts through the challenges of equity work. Thus, breadth of understanding across the nation could reveal crucial insights into the leadership dynamics and policy decisions made by those superintendents driving successful equity initiatives.

Second, researchers should investigate the long-term impacts of systemic racial equity initiatives on students' educational outcomes. This research could involve longitudinal studies to track the sustained effects of equity efforts over several years on student achievement, discipline disparities, and overall school climate. Additionally, researchers should examine the specific strategies and practices that prove most effective in different contexts and geographical regions, providing a broader understanding of how to successfully implement and sustain equity initiatives in diverse climates.

Third, researchers should evaluate the impact of professional development and training programs on the effectiveness of equity initiatives. Investigating how training influences educators' attitudes, knowledge, and practices related to racial equity can shed light on the components of successful professional development. Additionally, researchers could assess how ongoing support and coaching contribute to the sustained implementation of equity-focused practices in schools.

### **Reflections**

Reflecting on my experience leading equity efforts in UTISD, I am constantly reminded of the complexity and significance of this work. Conducting interviews and analyzing data for this case study has deepened my understanding of the diverse perspectives surrounding our racial equity initiatives. As one participant poignantly noted the following experience:

I think that the district and the community had a habit of confusing equity with justice.

The aim was not to completely turn over or disrupt the system but to make small changes to make little things better. . . . I think I had a habit of confusing that too.

The success and challenges we faced were evident in the responses of the participants. One of the most significant successes was raising awareness about racial inequities. Breaking down data by race highlighted systemic issues and allowed for targeted professional development. As another participant shared, “Every cohort and principal received multiple seminars and were regularly coming together to implement plans at their campuses.” This foundation was crucial in spreading awareness and beginning to address inequities.

However, the challenges were equally daunting. The opposition, exacerbated by the political climate, often threatened to derail our efforts. One participant reflected, “Politics changed how the public is involved in education. Opposition, who became regular attendees at board meetings, negatively portrayed the work that we were doing.” This created an environment where fear and misinformation became significant barriers.

The mental and emotional toll of this work cannot be overstated. Several participants spoke about the personal cost, with one stating, “I mean, it got to the point that I went to Alford and said I couldn’t do it anymore. I’ve reached my capital. I need help.” The relentless pressure and the need to be fully present and engaged took a significant toll on the mental health of those involved.

Reflecting on these experiences, I am acutely aware of the urgent need for equity in education. The work is not a sprint but a marathon, requiring sustained effort and resilience. Despite the challenges, the successes, such as the implementation of a racial equity policy and the creation of the equity department, were significant. Yet, there were also failures, particularly in developing measurable goals and accountability structures. One participant described this

failure, saying, “The policy gave some clear directives, but they weren’t necessarily the right kind of directives.”

As I consider the future of education and the pursuit of racial equity, I am both optimistic and realistic. Achieving equity is a complex and ongoing process that requires the commitment and collaboration of each generation of educators, parents, and students. The lessons learned from this experience will guide future efforts, emphasizing the need for clear goals, strong relationships, and unwavering commitment.

In conclusion, leading the racial equity initiative at UTISD was a profound and transformative experience. The reflections of the participants underscore the importance of this work and the need for continued dedication to achieving racial equity in education. The journey is far from over, but each step forward brings us closer to a more equitable future.

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## APPENDIX

## Appendix A

### Interview Questions for Stakeholders

#### Equity (RQ1 and RQ2)

1. Please tell me a little about your affiliation with Urban Texas ISD. How long have you been here/in what roles have you served?
2. How do/did you define equity in your district? **Probe:** Racial Equity?
3. What is/was your vision for moving racial equity forward?
4. What was the catalyst that led you to begin this work in your district?
5. Please tell me about the social justice/equity issues that are particular to the school district.

#### Initiative Practices (RQ1,CF1,CF2,CF3)

6. Do you know the origin of the equity initiative in UTISD? Where did the adopted policy come from? Who was involved in the development, and why and how did it arrive at its adopted form?
7. What changes were made to address racial inequity in your district?
8. How did you understand the racial equity policy?
9. Who did you look to when seeking clarity about the implementation of the policy? Why that person?
10. What did you understand as the goals of the initiative to implement the policy?
11. Tell me a story that you think best illustrates your district's commitment to racial equity.
12. What work have/did you done/do in your district to advance a racial equity agenda?
13. Whose role is it to lead a racial equity initiative in a district?
14. Who or what position has the most impact in implementing systems change in a district?
15. What was your assessment as to the success of the initiative overall? To what degree was it, in your perspective, a success? Why?

### **Superintendent Role (RQ1, CF1, CF3, CF4)**

16. Why do you feel the previous superintendent, Dr.\_\_\_\_, was chosen as superintendent of UTISD?
17. What was the superintendent's role in leading the racial equity initiative?
  - a. What about the superintendent's role in implementing the racial equity policy?
18. How did you (the person being interviewed) perceive the role of the superintendent in promoting or moving the initiative forward? The role of board members? Of other district leaders? Of campus leaders?
19. How did the superintendent's leadership practice address social justice/equity in the district?
20. What are some of the key strategies/initiatives of the superintendent's tenure to address inequities?
  - a. What was your role in implementing those strategies?
  - b. How do those strategies/initiatives address inequities?
21. Could you tell me what you feel the superintendent stood for – what was important to him? How do you know?
22. What are some of the changes you saw in the district under this superintendent's leadership?

### **Systemic Issues (RQ2,RQ3, CF5,CF6)**

23. When there were inequities, challenges, barriers, gaps in the plan, how did you talk about it? Who would you report it to?
24. What were the most pressing issues in the district? How often and how do you discuss these issues?
25. What were the challenges?
26. What were the lessons learned?
27. Do you feel the superintendent achieved racial equity in the district? Why not?
28. What was the superintendent's biggest failure? Biggest success?
29. What is your advice for future superintendents to foster an equity agenda in district leadership?

30. Conclusion: Is there anything I haven't asked that you'd like to add?
31. Thank you again. May I contact you if I have any follow up questions?

