Research Brief July 2022

This brief summarizes the manuscript, *Insights into White Supremacy Culture from Interviews with African American Leaders About Their Careers*.[1] The study was designed to help the team responsible for leadership development in the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) better understand the experiences of their African American school site leaders. It was motivated by anecdotal evidence the leadership development team collected that showed Black principals and assistant principals have had unique challenges and/or adverse experiences that have influenced their career trajectories and ability to stay within the district. It sought to answer the following research question: What are the factors that influence African American school leaders' decisions about their career transitions? Specifically:

1. What factors *draw* African Americans *into* leadership roles at SFUSD?
2. What conditions *undermine* or *hinder* the success of Black principals and assistant principals?
3. What conditions and structures *support* and *sustain* African American leaders?

Between 2018 and 2021, 34 African American principals and assistant principals participated in SFUSD's Office for Transformative Leadership for Equity and Excellence (TLEE) induction and training program. In addition, the TLEE staff provided contact information for nine more Black school leaders who never had participated in TLEE. This formed our population of 43 African American principals and assistant principals. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in summer 2021 with 20 SFUSD Black site leaders. Each interview lasted between 30 and 66 minutes, with an average length of 50 minutes. Half of the participants were principals (n=10), and the other half were assistant principals (n=10). Nine male participants and 11 female participants were interviewed. Of those who began their tenure as SFUSD site leaders, 11 remained in the same position or moved to a higher role within the school or district (e.g. assistant principal to principal). On the other hand, nine since have left the district entirely.

## Findings

- **Race is present and salient for African American principals and assistant principals.**
  - Without prompting, almost all the interviewees talked about the ways in which race and white supremacy culture impacted their daily, professional lives as school leaders in SFUSD.
  - They talked about the positive impacts of race, such as race matching with the students in their schools or their direct supervisors, that improved their motivation and resilience in the face of the hardships of the role.
  - They also mentioned ways in which TLEE helped them to be able to name, interrogate and challenge the characteristics of white supremacy culture, such as a *continued sense of urgency* that precludes inclusive and long-term decision-making and *perfectionism* that focuses on the negative while ignoring the positive.

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[1] Moore, C.A. (2022). *Insights into White Supremacy Culture from Interviews with African American Leaders About Their Careers*. Working paper, Stanford Graduate School of Education.

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- **Leaders identified a gap between the district's aspirations for antiracist pedagogy and organizational culture and the practices of individuals in different roles across the district.**
    - The district's avowed focus on antiracist instructional and organizational practices, as well as the leadership of African American superintendent Dr. Vincent Matthews, attracted several Black leaders from neighboring districts and charter management organizations.
    - Once they arrived, many saw differences between the espoused antiracist values and actual practices, especially of non-African American leaders and those who had not participated in the TLEE program with its explicit focus on racial equity and social justice.
    - Leaders who had an African American supervisor and/or one who had participated in TLEE talked about the ways in which they were able to openly discuss issues of racial equity and problem solve how to address them.
    - Assistant principals and principals, who didn't have leaders who were willing to interrogate and/or challenge white supremacy culture, were frustrated by the lack of an antiracist lens and felt like they had limited recourse in moving in that direction.
- **Thus, three types of social cognitive factors impacted African American leaders' decisions about entering, staying in or leaving their administrative roles. These include 1) personal characteristics, 2) administrator behavior and 3) environmental conditions.**
    - *Personal characteristics*, such as racial identification, religious and spiritual beliefs or a commitment to working with traditionally underserved students, *drew* Black leaders into school administrative roles and *sustained* them over time.
    - The reactions African American principals and assistant principals received to their *behaviors*, especially from their supervisors, could *undermine* their performance and tenure.
    - *Environmental conditions*, such as the TLEE leadership program, also *support* leaders through its provision of job-embedded professional development, acknowledgement of white supremacy culture, support for racial identity and explicit focus on racial equity and social justice.

**Next Steps & Recommendations to the San Francisco Unified School District**

As a result of these findings, we advocate the following three next steps and recommendations to support continued improvement of leadership development across the district:

1. Collect data to better understand the impact that the TLEE curriculum might be having in changing leader antiracist mindsets and practices.

2. Share information about the influences on the career decisions of African American leaders across district offices, especially those responsible for the hiring, retention, training, and support of school site leaders.

3. Develop a strategic plan to address the ways in which systemic inequities impact the experiences of all school leaders, in particular African American principals and assistant principals.

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