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# School District Leadership and Racial Justice: Examining the Use of a Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Framework to Advance Equity Between Black and White Student Populations Within New York State Public Education

## Abstract

The current climate in the United States reflects a heightened focus on examining and challenging systemic inequities that have long impacted Black individuals. Culturally responsive education efforts have increased as schools experience increasingly diverse populations. The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of how district leaders are implementing the New York State Education Department (NYSED) Culturally Responsive-Sustaining (CR-S) Education Framework in advancing equity between their Black and White student populations. Challenges and barriers experienced in the implementation of this framework, and approaches and strategies needed to overcome these were also explored. Interviews with six school district leaders in New York State provided the sources for the data in this qualitative descriptive study. The results of the interviews reflect seven categories regarding the implementation of this framework. These categories include providing a starting point, professional development, the role of stakeholders, disproportionality, familiarity with the CR-S Framework, uncomfortable change, and diversity of action. Thirteen themes within these categories emerged from the interviews. Findings indicate a range of experiences with the implementation of the CR-S Education Framework, with school district leaders in the early phases of utilizing the framework to directly mitigate inequities between their Black and White student populations. The findings provide the basis for recommendations for policy development, improved practices, and further research needed in order to continue to advance educational equity throughout the public education system.

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School District Leadership and Racial Justice: Examining the Use of a Culturally  
Responsive-Sustaining Framework to Advance Equity Between Black and White  
Student Populations Within New York State Public Education

By

Diane M. Wynne

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

C. Michael Robinson, Ed.D.

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St. John Fisher College

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## **Dedication**

I am beyond blessed and grateful for the opportunity to earn my doctorate degree and for all of those who have supported me along this journey. To my St. John Fisher cohort, especially my dear friends Danielle, Karen F., Karen L., Kelly, Leah, Nikia, and Susanna...you kept me going, and kept me laughing, throughout this incredible ride. Your friendship and lasting impact on me will always be a precious gift in my life. To the members of my team, Visionary Voices, I can't express how much I appreciate being matched with you during our very first class...what a blessing it has been.

To the St. John Fisher College faculty, your passion and commitment to inspiring the next group of social justice leaders is exceptional. I am beyond grateful to Dr. Robinson for being such an inspirational mentor, a trusted sounding board, an incredible dissertation committee chair, and one of my biggest supporters throughout my journey. To my committee member, Dr. McCarthy, I am thankful for your encouragement and your strong equity lens throughout my dissertation. To Dr. Pulos, my advisor, who encouraged me from the very beginning to enroll in the Fisher program and whose strong voice I hear in my head often when considering tough decisions. To Dr. Quigley, who has the most calming voice and the kindest quiet strength of any leader I've ever met.

To the strong female mentors and dear friends in my life who have stepped up and shown me time and time again what amazing things can happen when powerful female leaders support and strengthen each other...April, Danny, Francine, Jamie, Melanie, Nerlande, and Patty....you are all incredibly fierce women.

To my best friend, Nancy, who has been a constant presence and support at every milestone I have experienced for the past 40 years, and to my dear friends Louise, Renee, Sylvia, and Tracey who are my second family and feel like “home.”

To my nine siblings who may not be able to be there for every chapter of my life, but who will always have an indelible mark on my life’s journey and the person I have become.

To my mom and dad, Sylvia and Len, who are no longer here to celebrate this day with me but have been in my heart throughout every step of this journey...I know you are smiling down on me and are proud of your youngest daughter.

Finally, to all of the equity champions across the world fighting for the rights and dignity of those who continue to be treated as “less than” in countless ways...keep researching, writing, advocating, and speaking up...your voice matters. I am inspired by you and I am proud to stand beside you.

## **Biographical Sketch**

Diane M. Wynne is currently the Director of Wellness and Equity in the Rush-Henrietta Central School District. Ms. Wynne attended State University of New York College at Geneseo and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1996. She attended Rochester Institute of Technology from 1996 to 1999 and graduated with a Master of Science degree in School Psychology in 1999. Ms. Wynne graduated from the University of Rochester Warner School of Education in 2016 where she earned advanced certificates in School District Leadership and School Building Leadership. She enrolled in St. John Fisher College in September of 2019 and began doctoral studies in the Ed.D. Program in Executive Leadership. Ms. Wynne pursued her research on the topics of educational equity and racial justice, examining the use of a comprehensive framework to advance equity within public education, under the direction of Dr. C. Michael Robinson and Dr. Terrance McCarthy. She received the Ed.D. degree in 2021.

## **Abstract**

The current climate in the United States reflects a heightened focus on examining and challenging systemic inequities that have long impacted Black individuals. Culturally responsive education efforts have increased as schools experience increasingly diverse populations. The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of how district leaders are implementing the New York State Education Department (NYSED) Culturally Responsive-Sustaining (CR-S) Education Framework in advancing equity between their Black and White student populations. Challenges and barriers experienced in the implementation of this framework, and approaches and strategies needed to overcome these were also explored. Interviews with six school district leaders in New York State provided the sources for the data in this qualitative descriptive study. The results of the interviews reflect seven categories regarding the implementation of this framework. These categories include providing a starting point, professional development, the role of stakeholders, disproportionality, familiarity with the CR-S Framework, uncomfortable change, and diversity of action. Thirteen themes within these categories emerged from the interviews. Findings indicate a range of experiences with the implementation of the CR-S Education Framework, with school district leaders in the early phases of utilizing the framework to directly mitigate inequities between their Black and White student populations. The findings provide the basis for recommendations for policy development, improved practices, and further research needed in order to continue to advance educational equity throughout the public education system.



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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Local and national events have heightened the focus on systemic inequities and highlighted the importance of understanding ways in which racial injustices need to be addressed within all systems including public education. Schools are experiencing increasingly diverse student populations, leading to reform arguments that educators and educational leaders need to be more responsive to the cultural diversity of their students and families to ensure equitable student opportunities, academic outcomes, and educational equity (Blackmore, 2006). However, inequities continue to exist across the public education system that impact the opportunities and academic outcomes of large populations of children based on their race or ethnicity (Rowley & Wright, 2011).

The achievement gap between White and Black students has been extensively documented across grade levels in elementary schools, secondary schools, and institutions of higher learning across the United States (Brown, 2010; Ford & Moore, 2013; Hung et al., 2020; Stevens et al., 2018). Black students score on average 82.2% of that which White students score on tests of reading and math in 10<sup>th</sup> grade (Rowley & Wright, 2011). In 2018, 52% of White students passed New York State tests in English language arts compared to 35% of Black and Hispanic students, with similar gaps noted in the area of math for students in third through eighth grade (Brody, 2018). Efforts to reduce the achievement gap between White and Black students have failed to yield significant results (Jeynes, 2015). As Singleton (2015) notes, “the most troublesome achievement gap is the racial gap” (p. 39).

The experience of racial injustice poses a myriad of complex challenges. Racial inequities contribute to negative feelings, a greater increase in mental health challenges, and poor long-term health outcomes for Black individuals (Brondolo et al., 2011; Carter et al., 2019; Johnson-Ahorlu, 2013; Zapolski et al., 2019). Efforts have been made at the school and district levels to address inequities including, but not limited to, the development of equity teams supporting professional development for educators and school leaders facilitating equity data meetings focused on achievement of all students across races and ethnicities (Datnow & Park, 2018; Galloway & Ishimaru, 2019; Gannon-Slater et al., 2017).

Teachers have utilized culturally responsive teaching practices to address gaps in educational outcomes between students of diverse races and ethnicities (Bassey, 2016). However, these efforts often focus on providing individual support to Black students who are not achieving at expected levels rather than engaging in reflection regarding practices that may contribute to sustaining achievement gaps between White and Black students (Blaisdell, 2016). Therefore, these efforts are often focused on individuals and not on changing broader systems.

Attempts to address inequities through the use of culturally responsive leadership practices have been employed by school principals and district leaders (Cumings Mansfield & Jean-Marie, 2015; Theoharis, 2010). While these practices have supported conversations and driven isolated efforts at addressing inequities among different groups of students, experts have indicated the need for further research on the impact of a district-wide comprehensive approach to equity and the voices of many stakeholders to

address all aspects of this issue including gaps in achievement (Bhattacharya, 2016; Canfield-Davis et al., 2011; Castagno & Hausman, 2017; Rigby et al., 2019).

In 2018, the United States Department of Education approved the New York State Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) focused on promoting educational equity for all students and ensuring accountability in this endeavor (New York State Education Department, n.d.). That same year, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) began its development of the Culturally Responsive-Sustaining (CR-S) Education Framework, which was presented to the New York State Board of Regents in 2019. This framework, developed by education experts and stakeholder groups, was made available in 2019. Recommendations embedded within the framework are provided for school districts and institutions of higher learning to employ in addressing the needs of diverse student populations and mitigating inequities in education systems (NYSED, 2019). There is a lack of evidence regarding the use of the CR-S Framework by district leaders, as a literature search for empirical studies conducted on implementation of the framework yielded no results.

### **Problem Statement**

Inequities exist in public education that impact large populations of students based on their race, ethnicity, and cultural backgrounds. Achievement disparities, negative school experiences, and harsher responses to discipline issues leave Black students at a disadvantage in many areas of our educational systems (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Durham, 2018; Hung et al., 2020). Educational leaders have a responsibility to both recognize the significant impacts of these disparities and to support those who are discriminated against by mitigating inequities within schools.

NYSED has developed the CR-S Education Framework to support school districts in addressing the needs of diverse student populations and mitigating these inequities. There is a lack of evidence regarding to what extent and in what ways school district leaders are implementing this framework within public schools in New York State. Furthermore, there is a lack of evidence regarding the challenges and barriers experienced in the implementation of this framework and the specific approaches and strategies needed in order to support implementation. Because of the long history and extensive literature on inequities experienced by Black individuals in many systems including education, the need for additional information on ways in which this framework can be used to mitigate these inequities is paramount. Research focusing on the collection and analysis of this data will support school districts in mitigating inequities in public education between Black and White students and advancing policies and practices that promote equity.

### **Theoretical Rationale**

Ospina and Foldy (2005) have proposed a framework of social change leadership to utilize in efforts to engage in social justice-based change within organizations. This framework, used to guide the current study, has also been referred to as strategic social change leadership and has been identified as one of the only theoretical frameworks to offer specific guidance on addressing the issue of social justice (Dugan, 2017). The framework is rooted in both a worldview called *grounded humanism* that is developed through a set of leadership drivers, assumptions, and values of social justice and a constructionist approach to social justice (Ospina & Foldy, 2010). Ospina et al. (2012) define the term *grounded humanism* as:

An appreciation of the humanity of all individuals and a faith in their potential to contribute to the work required to transform society; it is grounded because an understanding of how society operates supports this faith, which includes an awareness that shifting power is central to social change. (p. 269)

A constructionist perspective of leadership highlights the relationships between leaders and those involved in social change, and how they are interdependent, resulting in collective actions that occur within a broader system (Ospina & Sorenson, 2006).

Ospina and Foldy (2005) assert that the theoretical framework of social change leadership includes a “consistent use of a set of leadership drivers, anchored in a set of assumptions and core values of social justice” (p. 12). Thus, a framework for social change must include both a worldview anchored in social justice and leadership practices to support strategic action (Ospina et al., 2012). The combination of these leadership drivers and practices builds collective power, which leads to collective actions, followed by long-term social change in organizations. Leadership drivers include values of social justice, working assumptions and beliefs including the role of power in social change, recognition of systemic inequities, and a vision of the future. Leadership actions include reframing discourse, bridging differences, and creating conditions for fostering the ability to affect change in others. The core values of the social change leadership framework are justice for all people, fair and equitable treatment, and equal opportunities (Ospina and Foldy, 2010).

Visions of social justice inherent in this framework are particularly salient to large organizations such as public education systems challenged with the complex task of identifying and mitigating inequities. Social justice aims are inherent to the current study,



which is examining the use of the NYSED CR-S Framework in providing equitable learning environments for all students.

The social change leadership framework provided a lens in the current study to understand why some school districts are successfully implementing the culturally responsive guidelines provided by the CR-S Framework and why some may be experiencing greater challenges and barriers in addressing racial equity through the use of this framework. The impact of leadership drivers and practices identified within the social change leadership framework contributed to these differences in implementation by district leaders. A greater understanding of the impact of these leadership drivers and specific practices engaged in by leaders when implementing the CR-S Framework provides a view of the ways in which school districts approach the challenge of advancing equity systemically.

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of how district leaders are leading their school districts in the implementation of the NYSED CR-S Education Framework, specifically in advancing equity between their Black and White student populations. The research focuses on understanding the challenges and barriers experienced in implementing the CR-S Framework and the specific approaches and strategies needed to overcome these challenges in order to utilize this framework effectively in mitigating inequities between Black and White students. Understanding the specific practices utilized to implement this framework in addressing racial inequities, the barriers to school district implementation, and the approaches needed to overcome these barriers is the basis of this research. This information is valuable for school district

leaders in their efforts to advance equity across their student populations through the use of the CR-S Framework. As the framework's principles and recommendations guide the work of systemic change within school districts, school district leaders were chosen for the study based on their role in leading systemic change efforts within their districts.

Although the CR-S Framework provides guidelines to address a range of educational inequities, further exploration of inequities between Black and White students was chosen for several reasons. Skin color is directly identified within the CR-S Framework as a characteristic that impacts the experience of receiving advantages or disadvantages within school systems. Furthermore, recent local and national events highlighting a history of systemic racism experienced by Black individuals have led to an increased urgency to identify and address inequities due to race and ethnicity within our school systems. It is important that these efforts at mitigating inequities are ongoing and that district leaders utilize resources to ensure that efforts are “sustaining,” as identified in the title and the guidelines within the CR-S Framework, especially as the literature indicates a long history of inequities between Black and White students throughout many areas of the education system.

### **Research Questions**

This study examines the use of the NYSED CR-S Education Framework by school district leaders in their racial equity efforts within their school districts. The data collected explored the following research questions:

1. As reported by district leaders of public school districts in New York State who self-identify as implementing the New York State Education Department (NYSED) Culturally Responsive-Sustaining (CR-S) Education Framework to

some extent, to what degree and in what ways is the framework being implemented to mitigate racial inequities between their Black and White student populations?

2. As reported by district leaders of public school districts in New York State who self-identify as implementing the CR-S Framework to some extent, what barriers and challenges are impacting the implementation of this framework in mitigating racial inequities between their Black and White student populations?
3. As reported by district leaders of public school districts in New York State who self-identify as implementing the CR-S Framework to some extent, what approaches or strategies can be implemented in order to alleviate barriers and challenges and implement the framework in mitigating racial inequities between their Black and White student populations?

### **Potential Significance of the Study**

The growing focus on racial inequity in the literature and in local and national events highlights the importance of understanding ways to mitigate inequities throughout systems including public education. Experiences of racial discrimination in schools contribute to achievement gaps and long-term negative impacts that continue through the adult years (Hung et al., 2020; Joseph et al., 2020; Rowley & Wright, 2011; Stevens et al., 2018). Black students identify racial stereotypes and their fears of fulfilling these negative stereotypes as they relate to achievement as obstacles to their academic success (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2013).

The need to address inequities within our public education systems is paramount, as the impacts of racial discrimination toward Black students go beyond public education

settings and affect mental health. Self-reports from Black students in Grades 4-12 indicate that those with a higher number of experiences of racial discrimination experienced higher symptoms of depression and anxiety (Zapolski et al., 2019). In addition, those with more incidents of racial discrimination reported higher substance use. Black students who believed that others viewed their racial group positively reported better health outcomes than those who did not hold this belief. Black adolescents in seventh through 10<sup>th</sup> grades who reported experiences of racial discrimination reported higher symptoms of depression 1 year later (English et al., 2014). Furthermore, Black adolescents who reported high rates of racial discrimination experiences also demonstrated higher symptoms of depression during the ages of 20-29, indicating that racial discrimination can have lasting impacts on mental health that continue many years after the initial experiences of discrimination (Carter et al., 2019).

Racial discrimination against Black individuals continues into adulthood and instances of bias and discriminatory practices in health care may further place this population at risk for less favorable overall health outcomes and higher instances of depression, anxiety, and feelings of hostility (Brondolo et al., 2011). Given the negative impact and long-term consequences of racial inequities faced by many students, it is important to identify and mitigate these inequities in all areas of public education systems.

This study contributes to a greater understanding of practices of school district leaders in utilizing the NYSED CR-S Education Framework in promoting equity within schools. Obtaining input from district leaders on the use of this framework, barriers to implementation, and approaches to overcoming these barriers supports a deeper

understanding of ways to utilize the guidelines in the CR-S Framework to provide targeted interventions at mitigating inequities between White and Black students in public education systems. With this information, school district leaders may increase their capacity to be proactive in ensuring that policies and practices are in place to mitigate racial inequities. Additionally, educational leaders across New York State will have access to insights from others to support the application of specific strategies to utilize in in advancing equity and supporting the success of all students within school districts.

Understanding specific practices that are being utilized to mitigate inequities within public education and the challenges inherent in addressing this complex issue have wide-ranging implications for other organizations. Practices and policies implemented in school systems can be used as a model for addressing racial inequity, in addition to a range of other inequities, within organizations beyond the public school system. Furthermore, information obtained from school district leaders is extremely informative in designing and implementing professional development targeted both on the development of mindsets and behaviors that will guide equity efforts within organizations, and the specific plans and accountability measures that can be used to ensure effectiveness.

### **Definitions of Terms**

*Black*-relating to any of various population groups having dark pigmentation or relating to African American people and their culture

*Educational equity*-a measure of achievement, fairness, and opportunity in education for all individuals regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, or any other personal characteristic or genetic trait

*Ethnicity*- a term used to describe someone by their cultural expression and identification

*Race*-usually associated with biology and linked with physical characteristics such as skin color

*Racial discrimination*- any discrimination against individuals on the basis of their skin color, or racial or ethnic origin

*White*-relating to a group of people having European ancestry classified according to physical traits such as light skin pigmentation

## **Chapter Summary**

Addressing the needs of diverse learners within public education is a complex challenge. Despite many often well-intentioned efforts, inequities have been extensively documented between White and Black student populations. This chapter provided an introduction to the ways in which these inequities present themselves and their impact on Black individuals. Gaps in achievement, experiences of discrimination, and disproportionate responses to discipline issues negatively impact many Black students in our school systems (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Durham, 2018; Hung et al., 2020).

A rationale for the importance of understanding the ways in which school district leaders are using the NYSED CR-S Education Framework in mitigating inequities between their White and Black students was given, including the urgency presented by local and national events highlighting a long history of systemic inequities for Black

individuals. This chapter also established a purpose and potential significance of the study, which may guide district leaders in leading systemic change focused on mitigating inequities within their school districts. A theoretical framework of understanding social justice change within organizations was provided. This framework describes the collective action that impacts social change when leaders use specific leadership practices and collaborate effectively with others in their organizations. In addition, definitions of the terms that are relevant to the understanding of the study were provided.

Chapter 2 provides a review of empirical literature on the current climate regarding racial injustice for Black individuals in the United States, racial inequities in achievement, disproportionality in discipline practices, experiences of discrimination, long-term mental health and physical health outcomes, and efforts by stakeholders to address these issues. Further information about NYSED's CR-S Education Framework and the social change leadership theoretical framework is also provided. Chapter 3 provides the foundation for the research design, methodology, and analysis for this study. Chapter 4 provides a detailed analysis of the results of the study including the categories and themes identified, which are organized by focus areas according to the research questions. In Chapter 5, a discussion of the implications of the findings, specific recommendations for policy, practices, and future research, and a conclusion of the study are provided.

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

### **Introduction and Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study is to gain an understanding of the efforts of school district leaders in mitigating inequities within public education between Black and White student populations through the use of the NYSED CR-S Education Framework. Inequities exist in public education that impact large populations of students based on their race, ethnicity, or cultural backgrounds (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Hung et al., 2020; Wasserberg, 2014). The NYSED CR-S Framework was developed to support school districts and institutions of higher education in addressing the needs of diverse student populations and mitigating these inequities. There is a lack of evidence regarding the implementation of this framework by school district leaders, challenges and barriers experienced in implementing this framework, and specific approaches and strategies needed in order to alleviate these barriers and implement this framework to advance equity between White and Black student populations. Research focusing on the collection and analysis of this data will support school districts in mitigating inequities in public education and advancing policies and practices that promote equity. This study will provide new information in the field of educational equity, as there are no empirical studies to date regarding school district leader implementation of the CR-S Education Framework.



While researching this topic, the literature search included a primary focus on empirical studies conducted between the years 2010-2020. Search terms included in the literature searches using various databases included: inequity or inequality and public education, education reform, achievement gap and students and race or ethnicity, minority achievement, discrimination and students or parents, racism and education or systems, discipline and students and race, stakeholders and education, and principals, teachers, or superintendents and equity. Inclusion criteria included terms such as “race,” “ethnicity,” “education,” “equity,” “achievement,” “outcomes,” and “discrimination.”

### **Reviews of the Literature**

The reviews of the literature establish support for this study. Table 2.1 illustrates a summary of the topics that were examined and reviewed listed in order of presentation.

**Table 2.1**

*Summary of Topics Examined in Reviews of the Literature*

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Topics
Current national climate related to racial discrimination
Racial inequity and the achievement gap
Racial inequity in school discipline practices
Experiences of racial discrimination in education
Stakeholder responses to mitigating inequity in education
Culturally Responsive-Sustaining (CR-S) Education Framework
Social Change Leadership Theoretical Framework
Long-term outcomes of racial discrimination

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### ***Current National Climate Related to Racial Discrimination***

Local and national events highlighting racial injustice and subsequent protests and calls to action have been increasing and are receiving considerable attention. The growing number of incidents and the literature about these issues underscores the importance of understanding ways in which racial injustices can be addressed within all systems including public education. Systemic racism has a long history in the United States and there is much current focus on examining and challenging racist policies and inequities within a wide range of systems that negatively impact Black individuals.

The traumatic impact of these injustices is evident in many sectors including education systems which often fail Black children (Worland, 2020). Kendi (2019) asserts that self-interest leads many with racist power to enact racist policies while holding onto racist beliefs in order to justify those policies. The repeated negative experiences of many Black individuals are thought to lead to increasing anger that is often present beneath the surface (DeGruy, 2005). According to DeGruy (2005), this anger stems from living in the United States, which is arguably the wealthiest country in the world, but continues to foster a range of inequities in opportunities and resources based on an individual's race or ethnicity.

Racial injustices highlight the importance, now more than ever, to ensure that educational systems are places where all students are not just surviving, but are thriving (Love, 2019). Our feelings regarding injustice should lead to transformative action (DiAngelo, 2018). White individuals have the power to infuse racial prejudice into policies, laws, and practices, which can have wide-reaching implications (DiAngelo,

2018). The current study was conducted during this challenging and transformative time of a heightened examination of a myriad of racial injustices in the United States.

### ***Racial Inequity and the Achievement Gap***

Numerous studies have documented the racial achievement gap between Black and White students. Singleton (2015) contends that even when socioeconomic status is not considered as a contributing factor, the achievement gap persists, as White students from lower income households still outperform Black students from middle income homes (p. 41). In the United States, this gap has been demonstrated across grade levels in elementary schools, secondary schools, and institutions of higher education (Brown, 2010; Hung et al., 2020; Stevens et al., 2018).

In a large study of diverse school districts across the United States, achievement gaps between White and Black students in the areas of reading and math were demonstrated across a 5-year period in third through eighth grades (Hung et al., 2020). These gaps were compounded by additional factors outside of the educational setting including racial and economic inequality in the community and level of education of adults in the household. Contrary to previous studies, having a high level of adult education in Black families did not help to close the achievement gap, but rather appeared to present additional challenges for children living in higher education communities with a stronger competitive White majority culture. This finding suggests the need to look further at achievement gaps and view them as opportunity gaps caused by greater systemic barriers to equity.

In another instance, when “more equitable small gap” schools that demonstrate achievement gaps of less than 15% between White students and minority students were

compared with “less equitable larger gap” schools with gaps of more than 15%, the proficiency rates for at-risk minority students fell within the 64.6 to 87.1% range, indicating a gap in achievement (Brown, 2010, p. 5). All 24 elementary schools that participated in the study were recognized as “honor” schools for 95% of their White and Asian American students scoring a Level 3 or above on the state test, suggesting implications for understanding that students from similar geographical areas with similar resources yield different results in achievement based on ethnicity.

Longitudinal studies including a range of schools such as suburban, urban, rural, public, private, and Catholic schools indicate that Black students scored on average 82.2% of what White students scored on tests of reading and math in 10<sup>th</sup> grade (Rowley & Wright, 2011). Overall, results showed that Black students demonstrated on average a score of 6 points lower on achievement tests compared to White students.

Levels of critical consciousness in students, the process by which individuals come to understand and act against oppressive systems, has also been linked to academic outcomes in Black adolescents (Seider et al., 2020). Black students in ninth grade were measured in areas of critical consciousness at the beginning of high school. Results showed that their baseline levels in the areas of critical reflection and critical action predicted their SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) scores during 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Furthermore, growth in the critical consciousness areas of critical reflection and critical action over 4 years of high school significantly predicted students’ GPA (grade point average). This study suggests that levels of critical consciousness, which support action against discrimination, may buffer the academic impacts of discrimination due to racial stereotypes.

The impacts of racial inequity continue into the college years, where non-White students experience greater discrimination than White students, which impacts their academic performance (Stevens et al., 2018). Racial/ethnic minority students report more experiences of discrimination than those reported by White students, with all groups including students who identify as Hispanic, Black, Asian, American Indian/Alaskan Native, and multiracial reporting more incidents of discrimination than White students. Black students reported experiencing the highest levels of discrimination compared to other groups, with multiracial students experiencing the second highest levels of discrimination. Among students who reported discrimination, 15-25% reported that it had impacted their academic performance in some way, such as receiving a lower grade or choosing to drop a course.

A meta-analysis conducted of thirty studies found that efforts to reduce the achievement gap between White students and both Black and Latino students have not yielded significant results (Jeynes, 2015). This study included a large sample size within each study, with an average mean sample size of 35,896 students. A range of interventions used in schools included, among others, a character education curriculum, a “Success for All” program, school climate interventions, changes in classroom organization, and various government interventions put in place in schools to reduce the achievement gap (such as Head Start and changes due to No Child Left Behind legislation). Given the large number of studies and large sample sizes examined, the results of this study emphasize the need to identify effective interventions for closing the achievement gap between White students and students of other races/ethnicities.

Research has identified the complex challenges in closing the racial achievement gap, especially when considering perspectives about the importance that individuals feel should be placed on this endeavor. Survey respondents expressed more concern for achievement gaps between wealthy and socioeconomically disadvantaged students than concern for the achievement gap between White and Black students (Valant & Newark, 2016). Overall, 63.7% of respondents indicated that closing the achievement gap due to socioeconomic status is a high priority compared to 35.6% who rated closing the Black/White achievement gap as a high priority. Furthermore, 44% of respondents indicated that they believe that the Black/White achievement gap is not due to discrimination or injustice in general society, highlighting the need to further investigate personal perceptions and engaging in blaming as contributing factors to the racial achievement gap.

### ***Racial Inequity in School Discipline Practices***

Inequity in discipline practices has been studied to understand the school experiences of students from a range of ethnicities and to examine how experiences of being excluded from learning environments may contribute to the achievement gap. Decreased learning time and lowered academic performance are closely intertwined when considering the school experiences of Black students. The racial discipline gap between Black and White students has been a consistent finding in the literature (NYSED, n.d). An examination of discipline practices indicates that Black students receive more office disciplinary referrals than White students regardless of the ethnicity of their teachers (Bradshaw et al., 2010). ODR (office disciplinary referral) data for students in kindergarten through fifth grade in 21 schools indicate that Black students are much more

likely to receive an ODR than White students; Black male students demonstrated a 55% greater chance of having a teacher submit a disciplinary referral on them compared with White male students.

Overrepresentation of Black students receiving disciplinary referrals relative to their representation in the population has also been documented both at the elementary level and middle school level (Hilberth and Slate, 2014; Ksinan et al., 2019; Skiba et al, 2011). These results included all types of infractions noted on disciplinary referrals, with Black students receiving many more instances of referrals for truancy, disruption, and non-compliant behaviors than their White peers. Regarding suspensions, Black students in elementary school were much more likely than White students to receive an out-of-school suspension for minor behaviors.

An additional study regarding minor infractions determined that Black students in sixth, eighth, and 10<sup>th</sup> grades receive more incidents of minor infractions from their teachers than White students (Amemiya et al., 2020). These minor infractions consisted of incidents recorded in a school documentation system that did not result in a more serious consequence such as a suspension. Having a higher number of minor infractions predicted more defiant behavioral infractions later. This suggests the need to further examine the reasons for the disparity between the number of minor discipline infractions in Black and White students, and the need to address this disparity prior to gaps persisting and escalating into more serious infractions.

Hilberth and Slate's (2014) exploration of differences in suspensions between Black and White students reinforce the findings of Amemiya et al. (2020) regarding harsher discipline practices toward Black students. In a statewide study including all

White and Black middle school students, Black students were assigned in-school suspension at more than double the percentage of their representation in the student population, indicating significant disproportionality in the use of suspensions for this population of students. It is estimated that over 50% of students receiving in-school suspension or out-of-school suspension are Black or Latino students, indicating that race is a predictive variable (Fergus, 2017). In addition, Black students received much higher instances of out-of-school suspension than White students. These results were particularly striking for sixth grade Black students who received more than 5 times the number of out-of-school suspensions than their White peers. In a large study of middle and high schools in all 50 states, in addition to the District of Columbia, being a Black student was identified as the strongest predictor of an increased risk of being disciplined for behavior in school (Ksinan et al., 2019).

Further evidence regarding disproportionate discipline practices has been provided by Wegmann and Smith (2019). Black students in sixth through ninth grades who demonstrated a greater number of behavioral infractions were much less likely to receive teacher warnings regarding their behavior, therefore, lowering their chances of correcting their behavior prior to receiving exclusionary discipline such as a suspension. Black male students in particular reported fewer verbal warnings from teachers about their behavior and less warnings sent home to their parents. Overall, results indicate that Black students who had a high number of behavior infractions in the past 30 days were much less likely than White students with a high number of infractions to receive a warning from their teacher prior to receiving a more significant consequence such as a suspension. These results may be related to teacher perceptions, as teachers were found to



be more likely to label Black students as “troublemakers,” to feel that that they should be disciplined more severely after a second behavioral infraction, and to feel that their behavior is more suggestive of a pattern than it is for White students (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015).

Furthermore, Reno et al. (2017) found an overrepresentation of Black students and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds compared to White students who were referred to a PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports) program due to their behavior. In addition, nearly half of the teachers surveyed indicated that they were unsure that participation in the behavioral program would impact achievement; this suggests the need to gain a further understanding of the reasons why Black students are being referred disproportionately to a program that teachers felt would be ineffective in supporting increased achievement levels.

The disparity in discipline practices between White and Black students impacts the trust that students have for educators. While 80% of White students report that they expect equal treatment toward White and Black students for disciplinary issues, only 55% of Black students report this expectation (Yaeger et al., 2017). This loss of trust toward adults within educational institutions regarding discipline decreases from sixth to seventh grade, with students who reported more awareness of disciplinary bias due to race experiencing a greater loss of trust in adults. Furthermore, lower trust levels predicted increased disciplinary behaviors during the following school year, suggesting that a loss of trust in educators is associated with greater instances of defiance toward institutional practices by students who may feel that they are being treated unfairly.

Increased referrals for behavior are associated with increased suspensions of students, which is also associated with a racial disparity in achievement, leading to a call for closing the racial gap in discipline in order to make gains in addressing the racial achievement gap (Morris & Perry, 2016). Black students were approximately 7 times as likely as White students to receive suspensions and to also concurrently demonstrate lower reading performance than White students. In addition, Black students demonstrated lower math achievement test scores than White students. Students who had been suspended at least once demonstrated lower baseline scores and the deficit between their performance and those of their peers who have never been suspended grew over a 2-year period. Therefore, students who are considered at-risk for academic difficulties may experience further academic challenges due to receiving suspensions for their behavior, leading to a widening of the achievement gap between White and Black students (Morris & Perry, 2016). Scholars have emphasized the depth of this issue and have asserted that being suspended from school can be considered to be a birthright of being a young Black student (Love, 2019).

The presence or absence of culturally responsive traits in school leaders may play a role in the choice of efforts aimed at addressing inequities in discipline practices in schools. While some school leaders have acknowledged the racial discipline gap between White and Black students, schools with more Black students are less likely to use restorative practices instead of punitive discipline as a response to negative student behaviors (Payne & Welch, 2015). Schools who have proportionally more Black students are less likely to use four types of restorative justice practices including student conferencing, peer mediation, restitution, and assigning community service. Black

student enrollment was associated with decreased instances of using these four types of restorative justice responses to student discipline, indicating a possible disconnect between leaders making efforts to close achievement gaps, but lacking the mindsets required for equity in discipline practices and practices which contribute to this gap.

Stutzman Amstutz and Mullet (2015) assert that restorative discipline and relationship-building are essential in creating safe environments that lower suspensions and raise achievement in students. Brown (2018) also describes the significant impact of restorative practices on achievement, attendance, and behavior for a diverse student population. These practices have been recommended to disrupt inequities for Black students (Kervick et al., 2019). Research on the school to prison pipeline, a term describing the increased probability of Black students ending up in prison who have been suspended disproportionately, has identified relationships as a key factor in disrupting this pathway (Yang et al., 2018). Teacher/student relationships disrupt unhealthy power structures in which teachers respond harshly to the behavior of students due to fear (Emdin, 2016).

### ***Experiences of Racial Discrimination in Education***

Experiences of discrimination in school have far-reaching implications, including contributing to achievement gaps between students from difference racial/ethnic backgrounds (Del Toro & Hughes, 2020; Johnson-Ahorlu, 2013). In the elementary school years, when students are aware of racial stereotypes, it hinders performance on reading tests (Wasserberg, 2014). Black students in third through fifth grade who demonstrated an awareness of racial stereotypes reported more anxiety and performed lower on a reading test when they were told that this test was a measure of their abilities

compared to when they were told that it was not a diagnostic measure of their ability. By comparison, Black students who were unaware of racial stereotypes did not demonstrate differences in their performance on the tests under the two conditions.

An example of the impacts of racial discrimination has been provided by Henfield (2011), who shared responses by Black male middle school students indicating three themes of racial discrimination by teachers and peers. These include assumptions of their deviance, assumptions of their universal experience as Black males, and assumptions about the superiority of White culture and values. Seaton and Douglass (2014) found that Black adolescents reported an average of 26 experiences of discrimination over a 2-week period with 97% of participants reporting at least one incident of discrimination within the study period. Daily perceived discrimination was associated with higher symptoms of depression both on the same day of the incident and on the following day.

The effectiveness of teacher practices and teacher understanding of students from diverse cultures is linked to student achievement outcomes and student perceptions about equitable experiences with teachers. Results obtained through surveys during a larger investigation into a noted achievement gap between students of different ethnicities in a middle school indicated four main themes of negative messages that Black students receive mostly from educators (Durham, 2018). The first involves messages that they are intellectually deficient compared to other students. The second message is that they are deviant, outside of the norm, or untrustworthy, with all male students in the study sharing that they felt as if they were treated as criminals. A third message conveyed to Black students is that they are unprotected and powerless to address incidents of discrimination against them. A final message reported by participants involved feeling as if they are

treated as “clowns,” feeling devalued, and being perceived as lacking goals. Additional support for Black students feeling that teachers view them as deviant is evident in research by Stevens (2009).

In high school, Black students perceive less caring and lower expectations from teachers than White students. Furthermore, they perceive less equity, fairness, and inclusiveness in their schools than White students (Bottiani et al., 2016). Younger Black students in fourth through eighth grades also feel that teachers care less about them than they do about other students. In addition, students expressed that teachers tend to ignore Black students more than White students, requiring them to expend additional efforts throughout their school day to be noticed by teachers.

In diverse schools, research has identified perceptions that parents have that teachers may have lower expectations for their Black children. Interviews with parents of Black middle-class students indicate that many of them feel that teachers have lower expectations for their children and therefore, present less opportunities to their children compared to White children. Parents also report feeling that teachers believe that their children instigate more trouble than White children (Gillborn et al., 2012). Parents expressed concerns that their children experienced ongoing racial stereotyping and bias, which create barriers for their children’s success. Chugh (2018) asserts that any level of bias within a system contributes to significant differences for those who are advantaged versus those who are not, highlighting the importance of addressing racial bias.

Overall perceptions of school climate have also been linked to race and ethnicity, as Black students report lower positive school climate (Parris et al., 2018). Black students in elementary and high school also experience more negative feedback from teachers than

their White peers regardless of their behavior (Scott et al., 2019). This negative feedback includes indications from teachers that their behavior or response is incorrect or inappropriate and is higher for Black students regardless of the ethnicity of their teachers. Black male adolescents have expressed feelings that teachers treat them differently than their peers based on their race and cultural backgrounds (Liang et al., 2020). They also indicate that they feel that teachers who do not recognize their own biases in interacting with Black students engage in more severe discipline practices toward Black students than toward White students.

Negative messages and experiences of discrimination based on a student's race or ethnicity continue during the college years. Multiracial students experience eight types of racism and discrimination, as shared during focus groups and individual interviews (Museus et al., 2016). Some of these include invalidation of racial identities, racial exclusion and marginalization, challenges to racial authenticity, and pathologizing multiracial identities. Thus, the experiences of multiracial students on college campuses reflect a myriad of discriminatory experiences.

Another example of the impacts of racial discrimination in the college years was provided by Johnson-Ahorlu (2013). In a study focused on identifying factors that impact graduation and retention rates, Black students were the only group to identify racial stereotypes as the biggest obstacle to their academic success. Information provided through surveys and focus groups indicated the toll on Black students regarding their fear of fulfilling negative racial stereotypes and their anxiety due to feeling inferior compared to students of other races and ethnicities.

Another example of racial discrimination indicated that Black students experience higher levels of discrimination from both peers and professors during their college years (Del Toro & Hughes, 2020). Instances of perceived discrimination from professors were reported to increase over time as students advanced through their college years. Students who reported higher levels of discriminatory experiences during their first year of college experienced lower graduation rates. In addition, higher reported instances of discrimination from peers during the first year of college were associated with higher levels of depression and self-reported poorer health during the fourth year of college.

College students who were asked to report their worst experiences of racism reported most of them happening at an institutional level rather than at an individual level or a cultural level, although all types of racism were reported (Volpe et al., 2020). Reported instances by Black students included experiences with racial discrimination within their education systems, in addition to other systems including the justice system, housing, and employment institutions. Reports of individual racism largely included instances of being excluded or rejected in some way, with additional reports of being the target of derogatory comments. Experiences of cultural racial discrimination included several types of instances, with the highest reported instances including negative statements directed at their intellectual abilities, skin tone, or regarding the act of dating outside of their race. In addition, feelings that others believe that their accomplishments are not due to their abilities and hard work, but rather are attributed to their race, were expressed. It is evident from these studies that experiences of discrimination toward Black students are present throughout their years of education, which contribute to lower academic achievement, lower graduation rates, and negative long-term outcomes.

### ***Stakeholder Responses to Mitigating Inequity in Education***

Attempts within public education to mitigate inequities have been driven by a range of stakeholders including teachers, school principals, district leaders, and parents. Teacher surveys regarding culturally responsive teaching practices indicate overall growth in their dedication to using these practices (Bonner et al., 2018). Results indicate four main positive themes regarding the use of culturally responsive practices: a belief in the positive benefits of cultural diversity in classrooms, knowledge of the need for differentiation in instruction and engagement with students and families, a growing feeling of competence in using culturally responsive practices, and a belief that the use of these practices will lead to increased academic outcomes and future success for students that will positively benefit the greater community.

In practice, these beliefs about culturally responsive teaching translate into specific actions taken by teachers. Specific practices employed by White teachers in predominantly Black schools support building relationships with students and promoting student success (Boucher, 2016). These practices include devoting time for building relationships with students into lesson planning, building a relationship with each student and their family, and sharing aspects of one's personal life to connect with students and challenges they may be experiencing.

Teachers who recognize the existence of structural racism within their schools have implemented specific practices in their classrooms to advance equity (Blaisdell, 2016). Practices include using project-based learning, considering additional factors other than standardized test scores to determine student access to higher-level curriculum, ensuring that curriculum includes the cultures and histories of students, and implementing



group learning projects so that diverse groups of students have opportunities to collaborate and learn from each other.

Effective school leadership targeted at advancing equity can be a problematic for school principals who have limited understanding of the history, cultural traditions, and backgrounds of their students and families, leading to disproportionate discipline, achievement gaps, and negative experiences for many students. A sense of urgency is viewed as required to advance educational equity but is not adequate to produce change on its own (Castagno & Hausman, 2016). Khalifa et al. (2016) identified four culturally responsive school leadership practices that promote equity. Leaders are encouraged to engage in critical self-awareness, to identify culturally responsive curriculum, to ensure inclusive school environments, and to promote engagement of diverse students and families. Complementing this work is the work of Madhlangobe and Gordon (2012) who identified six culturally responsive school principal practices including caring, building relationships, persistence and persuasiveness, effective communication, modeling cultural responsiveness, and fostering culturally responsive practices in staff.

The effectiveness of the implementation of practices and plans to promote equity and diversity has been inconsistent. Principals recognize challenges in implementing equity and diversity plans at the school level, noting that they are unprepared to address increased diversity in their student populations without additional district support (Young et al., 2010). Castagno and Hausman (2017) also emphasized the need for support at the school district level in the development and implementation of equity plans. Challenges in equitable practices have included a lack of district office support, in addition to the need for professional development and clear processes and expectations regarding equity

efforts. This is further complicated by the perception of school staff that some district office administrators are placing the responsibility of addressing equity solely on schools.

An additional challenge of addressing educational equity is the complex nature of engaging in conversations about race and equity within school systems (DiAngelo, 2018; Mayfield, 2020). Singleton (2015) asserts that having courageous conversations and discussing race in a safe and truthful way is an essential skill for all members of a school community. He identifies three factors that are necessary in order for educational systems to address the racial achievement gap including passion, practice, and persistence. Singleton (2015) further emphasizes the importance of a combination of both patience and urgency when engaging in the work of mitigating racial inequity in education.

Cumings Mansfield and Jean-Marie (2015) investigated how female high school principals embody the guiding principles of Singleton's work in mitigating educational inequities in their schools. Principals addressing the racial achievement gap describe aligning practices with core values about the importance of addressing inequities, ensuring diverse student clubs regardless of the number of students in each, and ensuring that voices of those who have been marginalized are heard. Furthermore, principals shared actions that addressed resistance of staff to change and the importance of building capacity of all staff to ensure that all students are successful. The importance of staff understanding of the concept of privilege and considering how personal advantages contribute to individual actions and opinions has been emphasized (Oluo, 2018). Changing mindsets and fostering growth mindsets is also essential in supporting people to be inspired, rather than remaining uncomfortable, about change (Dweck, 2006).

Several strategies have been identified that principals use to disrupt injustices in their schools. These injustices include school structures that marginalize some groups, lack of connections between school, students, and families from diverse backgrounds, and disproportionality in student achievement among groups (Theoharis, 2010). Specific strategies include eliminating segregated programs, ensuring a welcoming climate for all, directly addressing racial issues, and providing ongoing professional development for staff in culturally responsive practices. These practices, in addition to having a strong commitment to mitigating inequities, were viewed as essential by school leaders in order to lead with social justice as a driving force for all leadership decisions. Mayfield (2020) emphasizes that engaging in culturally responsive practices is important in all school districts, even those that do not reflect racial and ethnic diversity among staff or students.

Principals leading equity teams also focus their efforts on key practices to build capacity in their staff to address student disparities in racial achievement, in addition to disparities among other populations of students (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2019). Three main practices and routines were utilized by school principals in addressing inequities. The first practice includes implementing organizational routines such as book studies, equity summits, retreats, and opportunities to engage in conversations about equity to ensure learning and reflection about this topic. A second practice involves shifting the power of addressing equity from the sole responsibility of the principal to a collective focus among staff. This is accomplished through rotating the responsibility of facilitating team meetings among staff members and fostering opportunities for the voices of students and parents to be heard in multiple ways. A final practice that principals engaged in while leading equity teams involves ongoing reflection and feedback from team

members. This involves exit tickets completed by staff to demonstrate their learning and opportunities for data-based discussions to plan targeted efforts at addressing inequities.

In districts that have a strong focus on equity, the role of superintendents has also been examined. Superintendents' perceptions of their ability to engage in social justice change efforts placed them on a continuum of demonstrating five to seven characteristics that support advancing equity within their school districts (Maxwell et al., 2013). One characteristic includes demonstrating an equity attitude, which requires modeling respect and appreciation for all individuals through engaging in courageous conversations. Other characteristics include avoiding generalizing people by one negative characteristic, showing persistence in the work of addressing equity, being fully committed and patient with equity efforts, having an attitude focused on individual assets, and maintaining a coherent focus on work. An ethic of care has also been identified as a key trait in superintendents when addressing the achievement gap (Stansberry Beard, 2012). Additional traits include considering lived experiences and their connection to meaning, engaging in regular dialogue with others, and having personal accountability.

Parent input has been solicited in efforts to mitigate inequities in public education. The importance of the input of parents and community members in meeting the needs of a diverse range of students has been an area of focus in the development of a tool for teachers to support their engagement in culturally responsive practices and reflection (Griner & Stewart, 2012). Parents and community members provided input that fell into three themes of culturally responsive practices. These themes include outreach, representation, and classroom management. Specifically, parents shared ways that teachers can reach out to all families, strengthen diversity of representation on school

committees, and ensure consistent expectations and responses to student academic and discipline concerns.

Parents have also engaged in efforts to address the achievement gap between Black and White students through organizing as groups with specific actions steps, timeframes, and goals (Haydee Fuentes, 2012). However, parent advocate groups have experienced resistance from educators and parents whose children are achieving success in school. This resistance to interventions targeted at specific racial groups who have been disproportionately impacted by inequitable school systems has made the work of addressing equity challenging for parents who are advocating for change focused on mitigating inequities.

### ***Culturally Responsive-Sustaining (CR-S) Education Framework***

To support educational institutions in mitigating inequities within their organizations, NYSED has developed a CR-S Education Framework (NYSED, 2019). The development of this framework was initiated in January 2018 as a response to a directive from the New York State Board of Regents for the Office of P-12 and Higher Education. This directive called for including multiple stakeholders and experts in developing a guidance document for engaging in culturally responsive approaches within the public education system. Members in the development of this document included both an expert panel and an advisory panel of educators who were nominated by the Board of Regents. These 20 experts were located across the state of New York and served as consultants in the development of the framework. Additional stakeholder groups that provided feedback included individuals identified as school and district administrators, teachers, school psychologists, and students.

NYSED's CR-S Education Framework, which was released in 2019, is: Intended to help education stakeholders create student-centered learning environments that affirm cultural identities; foster positive academic outcomes; develop students' abilities to connect across lines of difference; elevate historically marginalized voices; empower students as agents of social change; and contribute to individual student engagement, learning, growth, and achievement through the cultivation of critical thinking. (NYSED, 2019, p. 6-7)

The overall vision of the NYSED CR-S Education Framework is to ensure that education systems promote student academic success, student development of sociopolitical consciousness and sociocultural responsiveness skills, and student use of a critical lens to recognize and challenge inequitable systems within broader communities. This equity and inclusion lens is noted to be an essential skill of educators in order to be effective in providing equitable outcomes for all students. NYSED emphasizes that the use of the CR-S Framework provides an opportunity for a range of stakeholders to collaborate in addressing the specific needs of their school communities.

Inherent in the successful application of the guidelines in the CR-S Framework is the presence of three distinct mindsets. One mindset is the belief that understanding and appreciating culture is an important part of education. A second mindset is the belief that students and families have unique assets and contributions that should be leveraged in collaborative relationships between educators and the students and families they serve. A final mindset noted to be essential in implementing the CR-S Framework is the belief in the importance of self-reflection to understand personal biases and become empowered to

mitigate inequities in our public education systems and in our broader world. These mindsets are considered to be critical in the work of implementing the framework.

The CR-S Education Framework is comprised of recommendations that are guided by four major principles: creating a welcoming and affirming environment, having high expectations and engaging in rigorous instruction, implementing inclusive curriculum and assessment practices, and engaging in ongoing professional learning. The first principle, creating a welcoming and affirming environment highlights the importance of creating safe spaces where the diverse school community is reflected and represented. A focus is on valuing and engaging everyone from diverse backgrounds inclusive of race, ethnicity, gender, language, socioeconomic background, sexual orientation, and disability, among others.

The second principle identified in the CR-S Education Framework focuses on ensuring high expectations and rigorous instruction. This principle highlights the importance of considering the different ways that students learn and fostering growth mindsets in students so that they feel safe taking academic risks. Ensuring that learning environments are intellectually challenging, foster independence, and empower students are important tasks according to this principle. The third principle of the CR-S Education Framework identifies inclusive curriculum and assessment practices as being essential. This principle highlights the importance of elevating voices that have been marginalized, learning about a diverse range of perspectives and the concepts of power and privilege, and dismantling systems of bias and inequities. The fourth and final principle identified in the CR-S Education Framework involves engaging in ongoing professional learning and support. This principle emphasizes the need for learning to be an ongoing process

and emphasizes the importance of individuals engaging in learning opportunities that will directly impact student outcomes.

Included in the CR-S Education Framework are guidelines for implementation for seven stakeholder groups including students, teachers, school leaders, district leaders, families and community members, higher education faculty and administrators, and education department policy makers. An implementation timeline guides the three phases of this project, as presented to the Board of Regents in 2019 (NYSED, 2019). The first phase, conducted in winter 2018 and spring 2019 involved raising awareness. Specifically, this phase focused on ensuring that stakeholders were aware of the CR-S Framework. During this phase, feedback was also elicited to ensure the provision of effective professional development and resources. The second phase, conducted in spring 2019 through summer 2020, focused on building capacity. This phase consisted of providing professional development focused on the CR-S Framework and sharing resources with educational leaders, teachers, and stakeholders. The third and final phase began in September 2020 and is currently ongoing. This phase focuses on sustaining practices within school districts, higher education settings, and among policy makers.

### ***Social Change Leadership Theoretical Framework***

Several theories were considered in order to provide a lens in which to understand the current research problem regarding equity in public education. Disciplines such as mental health and occupational health have utilized critical systems theory as a basis for understanding and addressing large-scale change within organizations (Hodges et al., 2012; Montano, 2019). Critical systems theory provides a lens for understanding ways to effectively alter systems that are complex (Watson & Watson, 2011). Waddell et al.



(2014) contend that effective systems change is accomplished through seven functions including shared visioning, system organizing, capacity building, measuring, financing, advocating, and prototyping. While this approach lends itself to complex systems within education, it lacks a specific social justice focus.

Two additional theories, chaos theory and critical race theory, were also examined. Chaos theory, which originated in the fields of mathematics and science, offers another lens in which to view education reform efforts aimed at addressing equity. This holistic approach for understanding complex systems considers both the turbulence and complications that exist within a current system and the chaos that occurs when an agent of change is introduced (Wertheimer & Zinga, 1998). In the field of educational equity, critical race theory has been used as a framework for understanding the relationship between race and power in creating equitable schools (Capper, 2015; Pollack & Zirkel, 2013; Santamaria, 2014). This theory focuses on how race and power interact, impact complex change, and contribute to systemic inequities.

Ospina et al. (2012) proposed a new framework of social change leadership to utilize in efforts to engage in social justice-based change within organizations. This framework has also been referred to as strategic social change leadership and has been identified as one of the only theoretical frameworks to offer specific guidance on addressing the issue of social justice (Dugan, 2017). The framework is rooted in both a worldview called *grounded humanism* that is developed through a set of leadership drivers, assumptions, and values of social justice and a constructionist approach to social justice (Ospina & Foldy, 2010). Ospina et al. (2012) define the term *grounded humanism* as:

An appreciation of the humanity of all individuals and a faith in their potential to contribute to the work required to transform society; it is grounded because an understanding of how society operates supports this faith, which includes an awareness that shifting power is central to social change. (p. 269)

A constructionist perspective of leadership highlights the interdependent relationship between leaders and those involved in social change, resulting in collective actions that occur within a broader system (Ospina & Sorenson, 2006).

The preliminary findings that resulted in the development of this framework for social change leadership were presented in 2005 while the study was ongoing (Ospina & Foldy, 2005). Ospina and Foldy's (2005) study consisted of leaders/leadership teams participating in the Leadership for a Changing World (LCW) program who were award recipients based on "tackling tough and critical social problems with effective systemic solutions, and though largely unrecognized outside their field or community, if recognized, would inspire others" (p. 9). Some of these issues included education reform, community development, human rights, immigration, and homelessness.

The framework was again presented after all data from a 7-year empirical study of social change within non-profit organizations in the United States was collected, and it was noted that social change organizations had been largely overlooked as a source in the development of leadership theory (Ospina & Foldy, 2010; Ospina et al., 2012). The final results included information from 60 organizations that were engaging in problem-solving for social issues, with a focus on how leaders establish connections and foster collective action to advance their mission. Three methodologies were used in the study including narrative inquiry (site visits, surveys, interviews), ethnography (participation in

the field alongside organizations), and cooperative inquiry (groups engaged in problem-solving leadership challenges). Through working with several organizations, several key findings related to social change leadership were identified.

Ospina and Foldy (2005) assert that the theoretical framework of social change leadership includes the “consistent use of a set of leadership drivers, anchored in a set of assumptions and core values of social justice” (p. 12). Thus, a framework for social change must include both a worldview anchored in social justice and leadership practices to support strategic action (Ospina et al., 2012). The combination of these leadership drivers and practices build collective power, which leads to collective actions, followed by long-term social change in organizations. Leadership drivers include values of social justice, working assumptions and beliefs including the role of power in social change, recognition of systemic inequities, and a vision of the future. Leadership actions include reframing discourse, bridging differences, and creating conditions that support others in affecting change. The core values of this framework are justice for all people, fair and equitable treatment, and equal opportunities (Ospina & Foldy, 2010).

Visions of social justice inherent in this framework are particularly salient to large organizations such as school districts within public education systems responsible for providing equitable learning environments. Social justice is a driving force in the current study, which is examining how the NYSED CR-S Framework is guiding changes within school districts in order to equitably address the needs of a diverse groups of students. The social change leadership framework may provide a lens in which to understand why some school districts are successfully implementing the culturally responsive guidelines provided by NYSED with positive results and why some may be experiencing greater

challenges and barriers to addressing equity through the use of the CR-S Framework, which may be attributed to differences in leadership drivers and practices identified within the social change leadership framework. A greater understanding of the impact of these leadership drivers and practices could have a significant effect on the ways in which school districts approach the challenge of advancing equity in a systemic way.

The social change leadership framework has been used as a reference in the development of additional frameworks specifically related to education. Leadership practices identified in this framework have been highlighted as being central to social change, especially regarding the importance of shared efforts in addressing equity issues (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014). Features of the social change leadership framework have been used in the creation of a framework of equitable leadership consisting of a combination of drivers and practices to address inequities in public education (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014).

Galloway and Ishimaru (2015) have referenced Ospina et al.'s framework for social change leadership in proposing a framework for implementing equity-based educational leadership standards, utilizing some elements of the social change leadership framework. In particular, they note the importance of leaders and other stakeholders working together for system-wide change through collaboration (i.e. collective action). They also refer to the work of Ospina and Foldy (2005) in their call for students in leadership programs to be placed in community-based organizations so that future educational leaders understand broader social change efforts (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015).

There is limited empirical evidence that this framework has been applied to enact social change in settings other than non-profit organizations and a limitation of this framework is the lack of empirical data regarding its implementation and effectiveness in organizations. Dugan (2017) asserts that due to the framework being based on grounded humanism, some practitioners may feel that it is not applicable to organizations and settings without a distinct social justice focus. Due to the complexity of its approach, leaders are encouraged to engage in deep learning about the framework before utilizing it for social change efforts (Dugan, 2017).

### ***Long-Term Outcomes of Racial Discrimination***

The need to address inequities within our public education system is paramount, as the impacts of discrimination toward some racial/ethnic groups goes beyond public education settings and has long-term negative impacts. In health care, instances of discrimination and its long-term outcomes have been studied. Compared to Black individuals working in health care, a pro-White implicit/unconscious bias was moderate to strong as demonstrated by White doctors, nurses, and medical receptionists (Tajeu et al., 2018). Furthermore, explicit bias toward Black individuals was demonstrated by all three professional groups. In another example, medical bias toward Black patients was found in the United States, but not in France (Khosla et al., 2018). American medical clinicians rated hypothetical White patients as more likely than Black patients to be personally responsible for their health by adhering to treatment recommendations and therefore, improving. These lower expectations and lower levels of optimism for the treatment and health of Black patients has implications for understanding possible blaming of some racial and ethnic groups for their overall health and well-being.

Both daily and long-term health impacts of racial discrimination have been identified. Brondolo et al. (2011) found that experiences of discrimination by Black, Latino, and Asian individuals at work, school, and in the general public are associated with low self-reported overall health. These instances include social exclusion, stigmatization, and experiencing threats. Exclusion and threats were also associated with higher rates of depression, anxiety, and hostility.

In a study of daily experiences of racial discrimination experienced by young adults, individuals reported daily instances of discrimination including feeling that others believed they were inferior and having others treat them as if they were less intelligent (Joseph et al., 2020). Moments of racial discrimination were related to momentary negative emotions and lower psychosocial resources such as coping skills.

Additionally, the impact of racial discrimination has long-term impacts on mental health. A meta-analysis of nine studies indicates an association between perceptions of discrimination based on ethnicity and an increased risk of psychotic symptoms (Bardol et al., 2020). An association between perceptions of racial discrimination and psychotic symptoms was found regardless of the specific ethnicity of the individual, suggesting that the perception of discrimination based on race, rather than the particular race of the individual, is related to an increase in these symptoms.

In another example, self-reports from Black students in Grades 4-12 indicate that those with a higher number of experiences of racial discrimination experienced higher symptoms of depression and anxiety (Zapolski et al., 2019). In addition, those with more reported incidents of racial discrimination reported higher substance use. Black students

who believed that others viewed their racial group positively reported better health outcomes than those who did not hold this belief.

Complementing results found by Zapolski et al. (2019), another study found that Black adolescents in seventh through 10<sup>th</sup> grades who reported experiences of racial discrimination reported higher symptoms of depression 1 year later (English et al., 2014). Black adolescents who reported high rates of racial discrimination experiences also demonstrated higher symptoms of depression during the ages of 20-29, indicating that racial discrimination can have lasting impacts on mental health that continue many years after the initial experiences of discrimination (Carter et al., 2019).

Racial inequity also leads to long-term inequities in income and wealth. In 2017, the Black poverty rate was almost 3 times the White poverty rate and the median net worth was approximately 10 times more for White families than for Black families (Kendi, 2019). Furthermore, the wage gap between White and Black individuals is reported to be the largest in 40 years. Taken together, these extensive studies highlight the urgency to address racial inequity early within public education systems in order to decrease long-term negative impacts on Black individuals in many areas.

### **Chapter Summary**

The current climate in the United States conveys a heightened focus on examining and challenging racist policies and a range of inequities across systems that have long impacted Black individuals. Inequities are evident in many sectors including our public education systems which often fail Black children (Worland, 2020). Chapter 2 highlighted many areas in which inequities experienced by Black students have been extensively documented. Numerous researchers have asserted that a racial achievement

gap exists between White and Black students (Hung et al., 2020; Rowley & Wright, 2011). In addition, Black students experience higher levels of discipline referrals and suspensions, further contributing to lost learning time (Amemiya et al., 2020; Morris & Perry, 2016; Skiba et al., 2011). Experiences of discrimination have long-term negative mental health and physical health outcomes (Bardol et al., 2020; Henfield, 2018; Seaton & Douglas, 2014; Tajeu et al., 2018). The NYSED CR-S Education Framework has been developed as a tool to support school districts in mitigating a range of inequities and is the focus of the current study to explore the ways in which it is being used to advance equity between Black and White student populations.

Chapter 3 will describe the study design and methodology to further understand the implementation of the CR-S Framework by school district leaders. An investigation of implementation practices, challenges and barriers, and strategies to address these will support increased understanding of ways in which the CR-S Framework can be used in mitigating inequities between White and Black student populations.



## **Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology**

### **Introduction**

Schools are experiencing increasingly diverse student populations. This has led to reform arguments that educators and educational leaders need to be more responsive to the cultural diversity of their students and families to ensure equitable student opportunities and academic outcomes (Blackmore, 2006). However, inequities continue to exist in public education that impact the opportunities and academic outcomes of large populations of children based on their race or ethnicity (Rowley & Wright, 2011). The achievement gap between White and Black students has been demonstrated across grade levels in elementary schools, secondary schools, and institutions of higher learning (Brown, 2010; Hung et al., 2020; Stevens et al., 2018).

These racial inequities contribute to negative feelings, a greater increase in mental health challenges, and poor long-term health outcomes for Black individuals (Brondolo et al., 2011; Carter et al., 2019; Johnson-Ahorlu, 2013; Zapolski et al., 2019). Efforts have been made at the school and district levels to mitigate these inequities. Some of these efforts include teacher engagement in culturally responsive practices, the development of equity teams supporting professional development for educators, and school leaders facilitating equity data meetings focused on achievement of all students across races and ethnicities (Blaisdell, 2016; Datnow & Park, 2018; Galloway & Ishimaru, 2019; Gannon-Slater et al., 2017). These efforts have yielded uneven results.

NYSED has enlisted education experts and stakeholder groups in the development of a CR-S Education Framework to support educators in meeting the needs of a diverse student population and advancing equity in public education systems (NYSED, 2019). There is a lack of evidence regarding to what extent and in what ways school district leaders are implementing the CR-S Framework within public schools in New York State, specifically in mitigating inequities between White and Black students. Furthermore, there is a lack of evidence regarding the challenges and barriers in implementing this framework and the specific approaches and strategies needed in order to alleviate these barriers and implement this framework in advancing educational equity for Black students, who have often been at a disadvantage in school systems. Identifying and targeting ways to mitigate inequities across a school district requires systemic change; therefore, district leaders were chosen to be interviewed for this study.

The gap in research regarding the use of the CR-S Education Framework provided an opportunity to explore further how district leaders are implementing this framework to mitigate inequities between White and Black students within public schools. Research focusing on the collection and analysis of this data will support school districts in identifying inequities and advancing policies and practices that promote equity for all students. This qualitative descriptive research study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. As reported by district leaders of public school districts in New York State who self-identify as implementing the New York State Education Department (NYSED) Culturally Responsive-Sustaining (CR-S) Education Framework to some extent, to what degree and in what ways is the framework being

implemented to mitigate racial inequities between their Black and White student populations?

2. As reported by district leaders of public school districts in New York State who self-identify as implementing the CR-S Framework to some extent, what barriers and challenges are impacting the implementation of this framework in mitigating racial inequities between their Black and White student populations?
3. As reported by district leaders of public school districts in New York State who self-identify as implementing the CR-S Framework to some extent, what approaches or strategies can be used in order to alleviate barriers and challenges and implement the framework in mitigating racial inequities between their Black and White student populations?

### **Research Design**

A qualitative descriptive approach was used in the study, allowing for a discovery of the “who, what, and where of events or experiences” related to the use of the CR-S Framework (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 338). This methodology was chosen as appropriate for the current study given that it allows for a description of certain chosen aspects of an experience or event. It is especially conducive to studies that seek to obtain answers to questions that will be important to practitioners in the field (Sandelowski, 2000).

A qualitative descriptive approach allowed for the gathering of information related to the specific research questions of this study regarding the implementation and challenges experienced with the CR-S Framework, which will provide valuable information for additional school district leaders in the field of education. As this study

sought to understand the experiences of district leaders in implementing recommendations embedded within four principles within a specific framework, qualitative descriptive research was an appropriate method for “straightforward” descriptions of phenomenon (Lambert & Lambert, 2012, p. 256).

To ensure that the researcher’s bias, which may result from working as a district administrator responsible for directing the implementation of the CR-S Education Framework, did not impact the interview sessions or the type of information obtained, researcher bias was reduced in this qualitative study. This bias was minimized by standardizing the interview protocol for all participants, transcribing interviews, and using two types of coding for interview responses.

### **Research Context**

The setting for the study was public school districts in New York State that serve students in kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Inclusion criteria for this study were school districts with student populations that reflect a minimum of 5-10% enrollment of Black students as identified by the NYSED school report card data (NYSED, n.d.). As the research questions focused on implementation of the framework to mitigate inequities for Black students, it was imperative to include school districts who serve this population of students. According to NYSED (2020), there are a total of 732 school districts in New York State. A total of 17% of students enrolled in public schools in New York State identify as Black or African American. These data are reported for the 2018-2019 school year and were used to determine inclusion criteria for the current study, as the 2019-2020 data was not yet available. Inclusion criteria also included school districts with a school

district population of at least 3,000 students to ensure that districts with a range of 150-300 Black students were included in the study.

### **Research Participants**

The participants in the study included six school district leaders: five superintendents and one assistant superintendent. Potential research participants that met the study criteria were identified through several means including networking with superintendents, a New York State Regent, and individuals in the New York State Council of School Superintendents (NYSCOSS).

Participants were contacted through a letter of introduction sent by email, which included a detailed explanation of the research study (Appendix A). This introductory letter asked the superintendent to confirm whether they are implementing the CR-S Framework to some extent within their school districts. The email also requested that the superintendent forward the message to the most senior administrator responsible for implementing the CR-S Framework if it is not them. There was a response deadline, with some flexibility to ensure a sufficient sample of participants and to consider the extensive workload of those in senior district administration positions.

A purposive sampling method was used to select six district leaders who indicated that their school district is implementing the CR-S Framework to some extent. A purposive sampling method allowed for participants to be selected according to a characteristic that would support the understanding of the research problem and offer a meaningful perspective on the given phenomenon under study (Gill, 2020; Gliner et al., 2017). In addition, network sampling was employed to make connections with participants whose districts met criteria for the study. The number of participants was

guided by the research design, as much smaller numbers can be used in qualitative research due to a lesser focus on generalizability of all findings (Higginbottom, 2004). The total number of individuals invited to participate was 14, with interviews conducted with the first six individuals who responded to schedule interviews. These individuals were contacted via a follow-up email. Research participants were not reimbursed financially or through any other means such as gift cards.

### **Instruments Used in Data Collection**

The current study involved the use of semi-structured individual interviews. Interviews were chosen as they provide an opportunity to understand the everyday experience of educational leaders engaging in this work, while also providing an opportunity for immediate clarification, if needed, on what is shared by participants in order to address the identified research questions (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In addition, interviews conducted with a small sample size allowed for an in-depth analysis of each participant's responses (Robinson, 2014).

Semi-structured interview questions focused on gaining more specific information from district leaders on their use of the CR-S Framework in mitigating inequities between their Black and White student populations. Specifically, these questions focused on to what extent the framework is being implemented, the challenges experienced and barriers to implementation, and additional approaches and strategies needed to overcome challenges and support effective implementation.

An interview protocol was used in the study (Appendix B). This protocol included seven questions, as it is recommended that the total number of questions in qualitative interviews be between five and 10 (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A four-phase interview

protocol was used to support the development of interview questions (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). This allowed participants to tell their stories in layers, while being closely aligned with the identified research questions and aims of the study. In addition, the interview protocol balanced inquiry with conversation in an “inquiry-based conversation” (p. 813).

Individual semi-structured interviews allowed for specific questions to be asked in a set sequence, while also allowing for follow-up questions (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Four types of questions in a particular sequence were used including introductory questions, transition questions, key questions, and closing questions. These questions provided an opportunity to understand the everyday experience of district administrators. In the context of the current study, these experiences focused on the implementation of the CR-S Framework within school districts. Interviews are a useful tool to understand more from those who have similar experiences to each other (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Pilot testing of interview questions was conducted prior to the study. This provided an opportunity to examine the validity of the interview instrument, ensure that the time allotted for each interview was appropriate, and engage in the practice of interviewing prior to the study. Information from pilot testing was shared with the researcher’s dissertation committee chair, dissertation committee member, and executive mentor to determine if minor changes in questions needed to be made prior to the study and to establish credibility of the interview questions. Approval was obtained from the St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board prior to conducting interviews with district leaders.

### **Procedures Used for Data Collection**

Once district leaders agreed to participate in the study, they were contacted to arrange a mutually convenient time for the interview. One hour was allocated for the interview sessions. Interviews were conducted via virtual conferencing utilizing the Zoom platform to allow for interviews of individuals outside the immediate region of the researcher and to accommodate current social distancing guidelines as a result of a global pandemic, COVID-19. Consent for participating in the study and audio recording of interviews was obtained from study participants. Each interview was transcribed using transcription software.

All confidentiality guidelines provided by the St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board were adhered to in this study. Participants were assured of confidentiality by refraining from using any names during the interviews and assigning a number to all participants. Transcripts will be kept on a personal computer with password protection for 3 years. Throughout the research study, a journal of reflexive memos was kept by this researcher. This provided an opportunity for the researcher to note reflections, observations about the process, and ideas about the learning taking place from the information provided in the interviews (Creswell & Cresswell, 2018).

### **Procedures Used for Data Analysis**

To understand the interview responses and capture themes, two types of coding methods were used. Structural coding allowed for an examination of similarities and differences, in addition to relationships between participant responses (Saldana, 2016). This type of coding in the study supported the exploration of which strategies from the CR-S Framework are currently being utilized by school district leaders and whether



district leaders share similar challenges in implementing this framework to mitigate inequities between their White and Black students. In addition, the use of structural coding supported the exploration of similarities in the approaches noted by school district leaders that are necessary in order to be successful in implementing this framework.

Pattern coding was used as a second cycle of coding to allow for grouping data into a smaller number of categories and themes to support a more meaningful analysis (Saldana, 2016). Reflexive memos were referenced during coding to generate further ideas regarding themes emerging from the data. Categories that were identified include how district leaders are using the CR-S Framework as a starting point to mitigate inequities, professional development opportunities, the role of stakeholders, ways that the CR-S Framework is being utilized to begin to address disproportionality in achievement and responses to student discipline, the level of familiarity with the CR-S Framework, the impact of uncomfortable change, and the diversity of action of school district leaders. Dissertation committee and peer consultation were utilized to gain additional feedback regarding coding and the themes emerging from the data.

The following is a summary of this study's research and procedures:

1. Preliminary Steps

- a. Obtained approval for the study with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at St. John Fisher College
- b. Engaged in purposive sampling to identify a pool of school districts who met the inclusion criteria and sent e-mails to recruit potential district leaders to participate in the study

- c. Identified six participants to participate in the study; sent e-mail with informed consent to participants
2. Data Collection
    - a. Piloted interview questions with district leaders
    - b. Revised questions based on feedback from pilot
    - c. Conducted and transcribed interviews
  3. Data Analysis
    - a. Analyzed transcripts and engaged in two stages of coding
    - b. Developed categories and themes based on coding

## **Summary**

The study of the practices of district leaders in implementing the NYSED CR-S Education Framework to mitigate inequities between their White and Black student populations provided an opportunity to learn more about the use of a systemic framework in advancing equity within school districts. The overall research design was a descriptive qualitative study to gain a greater understanding of these practices, in addition to barriers and challenges, and specific approaches and strategies needed to overcome these barriers.

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with district leaders who met the inclusion criteria. These interviews took place via virtual conferencing and were audio recorded. Transcripts were developed from the audio recorded interviews and structural coding and pattern coding were used to determine categories and themes organized within three focus areas aligned with the three research questions identified in the study.

Chapter 3 provided the foundation for the research design, methodology, and analysis for this study. Chapter 4 provides a detailed analysis of the results including the focus areas, categories, and themes identified.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore and understand the ways in which school district leaders are implementing the NYSED CR-S Education Framework in mitigating inequities between their White and Black student populations. District leaders were asked to share the ways in which the CR-S Education Framework is being implemented, barriers and challenges their school districts have experienced regarding implementation, and approaches and strategies to addressing these barriers in order to advance equity. Understanding the data collected through this research has the potential to provide meaningful information to other district leaders, educators, and NYSED in supporting school districts in mitigating inequities between their White and Black student populations.

The qualitative data were collected through six individual interviews with existing school district leaders in New York State: five superintendents and one assistant superintendent. Semi-structured interviews using an interview protocol were the sole instrument for the data collection in this study. Network sampling was employed once school districts were identified that met specific criteria, with the six district leaders representing school districts that met all pre-determined criteria. The total number of individuals invited to participate was 14, with interviews conducted with the first six individuals who responded to schedule interviews.

Chapter 4 is organized first by three focus areas, which represent the three research questions. It is then presented by categories and themes. The categories and themes provide a structure for understanding the experiences of school district leaders in implementing the CR-S Framework. All participants elaborated extensively and shared additional ways that they are utilizing the CR-S Framework to guide equity initiatives overall within their school districts, rather than addressing only ways in which they are using it to guide their efforts in mitigating inequities between their White and Black student populations. For this reason, categories and themes focus on all of the information shared, with specific information shared about addressing inequities based on race and ethnicity included within these categories and themes.

### **Research Questions**

The three research questions that formed the basis for this qualitative descriptive study were:

1. As reported by district leaders of public school districts in New York State who self-identify as implementing the New York State Education Department (NYSED) Culturally Responsive-Sustaining (CR-S) Education Framework to some extent, to what degree and in what ways is the framework being implemented to mitigate racial inequities between their Black and White student populations?
2. As reported by district leaders of public school districts in New York State who self-identify as implementing the CR-S Framework to some extent, what barriers and challenges are impacting the implementation of this framework in mitigating racial inequities between their Black and White student populations?

3. As reported by district leaders of public school districts in New York State who self-identify as implementing the CR-S Framework to some extent, what approaches or strategies can be used in order to alleviate barriers and challenges and implement the framework in mitigating racial inequities between their Black and White student populations?

### **Data Analysis and Findings**

The data analysis generated seven categories and 13 themes, which are organized under three focus areas aligned with the three research questions identified in this study. Theme titles are direct quotes from district leaders; direct quotes were chosen to identify themes as they provide powerful insight into the themes that emerged through the specific words spoken by participants.

The first focus area, aligned with Research Question 1, includes four categories regarding the implementation of the CR-S Framework. The first category, *providing a starting point*, incorporates two themes: (a) “Make sure we’re in alignment with the framework” (Participant 3), and (b) “This is a difficult conversation to have, but it’s necessary” (Participant 6). The second category, *professional development*, incorporates two themes: (a) “What can we do ongoing to embed these pieces into all of the PD that we offer?” (Participant 1), and (b) “Empower our staff to lead those professional developments” (Participant 4). The third category, *the role of stakeholders*, incorporates two themes: (a) “You actually formed the taskforce and we’re actually doing the plan” (Participant 1), and (b) “We’re really trying to elevate student voice” (Participant 4). The fourth category, *disproportionality*, incorporates two themes: (a) “We’ve been chasing

the achievement gap for years” (Participant 4), and “Make our responses more therapeutic and less punitive” (Participant 6).

The second focus area, aligned with Research Question 2, includes two categories related to challenges and barriers experienced in the implementation of the CR-S Framework. The fifth category, *familiarity with the CR-S Framework*, captured one theme related to challenges presented with the mechanics of effective communication and time needed to understand the framework: (a) “Are you actually providing the space and time to roll it out?” (Participant 1). The sixth category, *uncomfortable change*, captured the thoughts and feelings from participants regarding the difficulties inherent in implementing change and includes two themes: (a) “The challenge is to get people to acknowledge that it’s a real problem” (Participant 5), and (b) “There are some people who are still very, very resistant” (Participant 6).

The third focus area, aligned with Research Question 3, includes one category capturing the spirit of responses by participants regarding their approaches and strategies to overcoming challenges in implementing the CR-S Framework and mitigating inequities in general within their school districts. This seventh and final category, *diversity of action*, incorporates two themes: (a) “Make sure our kids see themselves reflected in the educators” (Participant 4), and (b) “I think people are talking too much and not doing enough” (Participant 3). Table 4.1 illustrates a summary of the focus areas, categories, and themes.

**Table 4.1***Summary of Focus Areas, Categories, and Themes*

Focus Areas	Categories	Themes
Implementation of the CR-S Framework	Providing a Starting Point	Make Sure We're in Alignment with the Framework  This is a Difficult Conversation to Have, But it's Necessary
	Professional Development	What Can We Do Ongoing to Embed These Pieces into All of the PD That We Offer?  Empower Our Staff to Lead Those Professional Developments
	The Role of Stakeholders	You Actually Formed the Taskforce and We're Actually Doing the Plan  We're Really Trying to Elevate Student Voice
	Disproportionality	We've Been Chasing the Achievement Gap for Years  Make Our Responses More Therapeutic and Less Punitive
Challenges and Barriers	Familiarity with the CR-S Framework	Are You Actually Providing the Space and Time to Roll it Out?
	Uncomfortable Change	The Challenge is to Get People to Acknowledge That it's a Real Problem



Approaches and Strategies

Diversity of Action

There Are Some People Who Are Still Very, Very Resistant

Make Sure Our Kids See Themselves Reflected in the Educators

I Think People Are Talking Too Much and Not Doing Enough

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Focus Area 1: Implementation of the CR-S Framework

***Category 1: Providing a Starting Point***

The first category, *providing a starting point*, emerged as participants shared the ways in which they are using the CR-S Framework as a starting point to guide their efforts at addressing inequities within their districts. The two themes that were identified under this category include: (a) “Make sure we’re in alignment with the framework” (Participant 3), and (b) “This is a difficult conversation to have, but it’s necessary” (Participant 6).

**“Make Sure We’re in Alignment With the Framework” (Participant 3).**

School district leaders described several ways in which they are using the CR-S Framework as a guide to ensure that their equity efforts are aligned with the recommendations provided within the framework. This alignment is viewed as important, as described by Participant 3 who discussed changes made in the district: “We’re aligning that to the framework to say, are we truly moving in a direction we want?” Participant 4 shared how the district is using the CR-S Framework to guide equity work: “The New York State Framework serves as a mechanism for us in our work around...how we create inclusive culture, responsive spaces for all our students and families.” Other district

leaders shared their focus on alignment with the CR-S Framework: “I think that what we’re doing is making sure that what we do commit to as an implementation plan or implementation step, that we can make sure we’re in alignment with the framework” (Participant 3). Participant 4 elaborated further on how the framework has been an “anchor” for the school district in many areas:

One thing is just becoming accustomed with the document itself and understanding what it means and what it might mean for us as a school system. We spent a great deal of time looking at it as educators universally across the system and its application to the work that we had already been doing. I think it serves as a great anchor for the efforts that we’re putting forth as it relates to whether it’s in the form of professional development, whether it’s in the form of curriculum work, whether it’s in the form of just overall creating an inclusive environment for our students.

Participant 5 also referred to the CR-S Framework as an “anchor” when describing steps that the school district has taken:

The board did agree to update some of our district goals and some of our core beliefs around cultural responsiveness, around access and equity, which we have been talking about for several years, but there’s not been anything to kind of anchor to as far as leadership in the district, other than saying it’s important, but now we have something to anchor to.

Many district leaders also shared how district and building leaders have been using the CR-S Framework as a starting point for their equity work. Participant 5 described school building leaders’ focus on one of the four principles identified in the

framework, creating a welcoming and affirming environment: “So the welcoming and affirming environment...this document we used a lot and each of them again had a goal to share that with their staff and talk about what would that look like in their classroom?” Participant 5 further elaborated: “Everyone deserves a welcoming and nurturing environment is actually our core belief.”

Family engagement and the importance of trust between school staff and families was shared as it relates to supporting students with school attendance concerns: “We actually worked with those families to provide them with services, and we link them up to our municipalities...number one, you have to build that trust. That’s so important in that relationship” (Participant 6). Participant 3 shared how the school district launched a welcoming center for families in alignment with the framework:

Our welcoming center is designed specifically with what is in the welcoming and affirming environment component of the framework...to give you an example of establishing something new in alignment to what’s in the framework. So, we know there’s a component right in the framework around welcoming and affirming environments; well, we want to make sure we have something very specific to families and visitors that is dedicated just for them.

Additional participants indicated how the CR-S Framework is being used by school leaders: “It’s been a resource. Our administrators have been using it as a reference when engaging with their staffs” (Participant 2). Participant 1 shared the following when describing the CR-S Framework: “We had a team pulling out chunks that we were looking at in terms of the welcoming and affirming environment, high expectations, rigorous instruction.” Further ways in which the CR-S Framework is being used as a

guide to support a common understanding of equity were shared:

We made this accessible to every leader in the district. We've asked them to learn it. We've asked them to through PLC work to kind of understand the components of the framework and that was simply, let's just have an awareness, right? So, part of our implementation was simply, let's just get to understand the components. Let's gain an understanding and awareness of why New York State is moving in this direction, which wasn't a far-fetch for our administrators because we've been talking about being an anti-racist school district. We've been talking about for some years now...what does equity mean to us? So that way we have a common understanding and a common language around that. So, in our district, when we say equity, everyone needs to know what we're referring to. (Participant 3)

Several district leaders expressed their appreciation of the framework and the support it provides them as district leaders to have a starting point, as stated by Participant 6: "The framework has been very, very helpful, and it's something that we refer to on a regular basis when we plan as to what we want to do and what we think we need to do." Participant 4 elaborated on the importance of the framework, sharing: "it's the core of our equity work throughout the district," further stating: "it's not a set curriculum, but it gives you sort of the key points that you want to use as you're doing the work."

Participants shared the ways in which they feel that the CR-S Framework is guiding specific action steps and their feelings that this tool should be used. As Participant 6 shared:

We've talked about the document and some of the strategies in there...we're

using it as a Framework for what we do. Why reinvent the wheel when it's out there, right? And if there are certain suggestions or certain recommendations or ideologies that, you know, we need to follow to make this work, then we're certainly going to do that.

The participants also expressed their feelings about being reassured that the equity efforts their districts are engaging in are aligned with the CR-S Framework: "They had, you know, the categories that actually aligned. We were proud of ourselves that we actually have these core beliefs already...this is a pure connection" (Participant 5).

**"This is a Difficult Conversation to Have, but it's Necessary" (Participant 6).**

Several participants spoke about how becoming acquainted with the CR-S Framework has encouraged their staff to begin having difficult conversations, many about inequities related to race and ethnicity. As Participant 6 shared: "It doesn't always have to be confrontational, and that's one of the things that we try to tell our staff and our students...this is a difficult conversation to have, but it's necessary." Participant 6 further discussed this at another point in the interview:

When you have those types of conversations, you realize that everybody, we all wear the same uniform and we all want the same, we all want the same things. We all want the best. We all want to be treated with kindness and respect and given opportunities that we deserve, and it should be based upon you know, us as people, not based upon anybody's culture, race...we've got a ways to go as a society on that, but I think we've made tremendous strides. We have to keep moving, we have to keep moving in the right direction.

Participant 5 described the relationship between having difficult conversations

and enacting change as it relates to equity:

People have come a long way because we're taking time to explain what we really mean. We're trying to talk about it as opposed to making people feel like they did something wrong, but it's still an uncomfortable situation. But I think, you know, I have to be uncomfortable to make change. If you're not uncomfortable, I don't think change is going to happen.

When discussing how the CR-S Framework is providing a starting point for them in discussing and mitigating inequities between their White and Black student populations, several participants shared what the beginning of this work looks like within their school districts. For example, Participant 4 referred to: "Making shifts in that space, having real conversations around race." Participant 2 further shared the ways in which the CR-S Framework has supported conversations about racial inequities: "Becoming an anti-racist culturally responsive school district is a primary focus for me and for our board, and this resource has been great for us to help do that." The challenges of conversations regarding race were evident, as expressed by Participant 1:

I think people are very nervous right now that, you know, if I say something or I make myself vulnerable to put something out there and engage, people might take it the wrong way and they're going to think badly of me. So, I think we need some more ongoing support in terms of how to have those conversations, what we kind of do to reassure people that we're not saying you're doing something wrong...unless it's a blatant example of racism or something like that, but you know, if you're trying to engage in this conversation and something just comes out wrong, people are worried they won't be protected if someone takes it the

wrong way.

### ***Category 2: Professional Development***

The second category, *professional development*, was a subject that was evident in responses from all six participants. Participants shared that professional development was an essential area in the implementation of the CR-S Framework within their districts, including raising awareness regarding inequities between their White and Black student populations. This category is also identified as one of the four principles within the CR-S Framework, indicating the importance of this area in ongoing equity efforts. The two themes that emerged under this category include: (a) “What can we do ongoing to embed these pieces into all of the PD that we offer?” (Participant 1) and (b) “Empower our staff to lead those professional developments” (Participant 4).

**“What Can We Do Ongoing to Embed These Pieces Into All of the PD That We Offer?” (Participant 1).** The participants expressed their efforts to ensure that a principle of the CR-S Framework, ongoing professional learning and support, is a major area of focus in their equity efforts within their districts. When discussing equity conversations, Participant 2 shared: “I think it’s going to be tough...but that ongoing professional development and knowing that there’s never an end to this and it’s not a checkbox is going to be tough.”

Participant 5 shared how the district is making professional development a priority: “The professional learning, again at our conference days, we have offered time and time again over the past many years...we’re looking at, you know, kind of the full

picture of a welcoming and affirming environment, not just race.” Other efforts to ensure time for professional development were shared, with one district leader indicating how the challenge of providing time for professional learning on the topic of equity was addressed:

When are people actually going to do this? So, what we strategically did in order to have every single employee engage and doing this work, when do you think you have to do it? You have to do it during the workday because if you do it outside of their workday, then you either have to pay them and they have other commitments, legitimate commitments. I have, you know, I have a commitment to family. I got to get home in order to support my family. We wanted to remove those barriers...that’s an organizational challenge and barrier that we just said, we have a way to make sure every single person engages during the workday, and it’s mandated. (Participant 3)

Participant 1 also discussed mandatory professional development on the topic of equity and inclusion:

Our entire leadership team did a 3-day training, and it wasn’t three days in a row, it was three separate days. It was a mandatory professional development...what can we do ongoing to embed these pieces into all of the PD that we offer?

The importance of raising awareness about the CR-S Framework and using it to develop a strategic plan was also discussed by Participant 1 in relation to professional learning:

When we met with our staff, we said, do we want a strategic plan for diversity, equity, and inclusion as a standalone document? Or do we want to take our



strategic plan and embed and integrate all of those things within our plan?...If there's not the training to go along with it and you can hand me a plan and tell me to implement it, but if I don't have any of the background knowledge of the framework...it's dependent on who you have in the seats in certain places, and it goes further.

When reflecting on how they are using the CR-S Framework to guide professional development to support mitigating inequities between White and Black students, some participants referred to the work being done to address implicit bias toward students. As Participant 2 shared: "All of our educators are going through workshops around implicit bias and unconscious bias, which is a big part of the self-reflection phase that we find ourselves in." Participant 5 also addressed the topic of implicit bias and the use of book studies to reflect on this: "The book study...we've done some before on implicit bias...administrators had a choice of three different book studies, but we came together once a month on one day and looked at those three different books and had conversations." Participant 5 elaborated on the use of book studies later in the interview and referenced the diagram of a tree, which is presented in the CR-S Framework as a visual representation of the four principles identified in the framework:

Right now, we're focused on the book study. We're talking about the pillars.

We're talking about how to have these conversations. We're talking about, what are the things in the district we've done? How do we tie those together? And so, I think we'll come back to these categories, you know, back to the tree again.

When discussing equity initiatives, Participant 6 shared how professional learning played a role:

We felt that before we actually took the program into buildings, we had to provide our staff with the training and the understanding to make that work. So, there were a number of professional development opportunities that were made available to our teachers, our teaching assistants, all of our staff, our administrators, and those primarily consisted about...cultural diversity, cultural responsiveness, equity, social justice.

Participant 6 elaborated on the topic of professional development later in the interview, sharing: “We do a lot of professional development, our district, especially in regards to...issues such as these and discussing the ‘preconceived notions’ of some individuals”. Participant 6 continued:

To say that there may not have been some preconceived notions that some of the staff may have had, I can’t say that there may have been, and we worked on that through our staff development in regard to cultural diversity sensitivity.

In addition to professional learning opportunities, including book studies, guest speakers are being used as a resource for this work: “It’s getting into the buildings where we’re having forums. We’re going to have more forums. We’re going to bring in more speakers” (Participant 6). Participant 1 also echoed the use of those outside the district to support professional development on the topic of equity and the implementation of the CR-S Framework: “We have hired an outside consultant to support us with the work...we don’t know everything, right? We’re bringing someone in to help us because we want to get things right.” Another participant discussed hiring a consultant to support equity work and discussed the benefits of having someone who does not work in the district provide professional development: “We’ve tried to move ourselves along, but you know, you’re

never an expert in your own land and in your own school district” (Participant 5).

**“Empower Our Staff to Lead Those Professional Developments” (Participant 4).** Although some districts discussed hiring consultants, the importance of empowering district staff to engage in learning and to lead professional development was emphasized by several participants. Participant 3 shared the importance of ownership of this work by district staff, which was supported through equity ambassadors in schools:

You can’t just have an outside expert come in and be like the guru...these people come and go. So, how are you sustaining the work? You got to build capacity from within. So, we have equity ambassadors, two of them, at every single school. They work with the facilitator. They’re the ones on the ground. They’re the ones in the building. They’re the ones facilitating the professional learning sessions.

Participant 4 further emphasized the importance of staff leading professional development on topics related to the CR-S Framework:

That’s the work of our building equity leaders. So, they’ve used the framework and turnkey the framework so we empower our staff to lead those professional developments...the relevance and what it means, what the framework means for pre-K and kindergarten is very different than what it would look like at Grade 5. So, that’s where we empower our educators, colleague to colleague...help to turnkey some of that information.

However, concerns about staff being skilled in leading professional development were shared by several district leaders who noted the range in skill level and comfort level of those being asked to lead this work. As Participant 3 indicated:

Another key lever is where are your teachers, where are your administrators,

where are your central office and senior staff in their understanding and their capacity to lead? And that for us is all over the place.

Several participants elaborated on these concerns regarding the readiness and comfort levels of administrators in leading this work, especially as it relates to conversations and leading professional development about inequities and race. Participant 5 discussed some of the feelings experienced by those being asked to lead: “We’re utilizing Courageous Conversations about Race...how do we have these conversations? Because what has happened with the idea of working with the administrative team and asking them to turnkey is that they still feel uncomfortable.” Participant 5 further discussed administrators’ concerns about leading professional development:

They feel like they’re not an expert and they don’t know how to answer a question if someone presents something. And so, you know, it’s kind of difficult to move forward when people don’t feel like they independently can do the work and again, I agree with them, I don’t feel like an expert either...so I get it, but if we’re all too afraid and we just don’t dare do it, then again, where are we going to go?

Participant 1 further elaborated about the fears expressed by some school and district administrators in leading this work:

It aligns to professional development, but even for administrators, we’ve had a lot of people that have come forward and said, “I’d like to be a part of that, but I’m really afraid I’m going to say the wrong thing. I’m going to say it in a way and someone’s going to take it the wrong way and then it’s going to be held against me or people who are going to think that’s who I am.” So, I’m having some of the

difficult conversations about race.

This feeling of saying the “wrong thing” was evident in other responses by district leaders when discussing building principals leading equity work: “A few of them have said, I’m just not comfortable...I feel like I’m going to do it wrong. I feel like I’m going to say the wrong thing” (Participant 5). Participant 5 further elaborated about the important role of principals in leading professional development on the topics of advancing equity through the use of the CR-S Framework:

It does make a difference whomever is leading and again, I also say that about principals too because they’re the ones in that building each and every day...so let’s come up with an action plan, but they could still go back and do nothing. So that’s where I go back to what I was saying about empowering.

Participant 5 further shared the district’s efforts:

I think we’re getting there...trying to empower our principals to take more independent action like, no, you got this, you can do it. I have to have them do it.

I have to empower them to do it, or it’s not going to happen. It’s not going to unfold itself without that. So, I think people are aware, but we have a long road.

To address some of these concerns, the importance of collaboration between building leaders and staff was emphasized: “We have these equity mentors in every building that are leading, they’re partnering with principals to develop staff meetings focused on equity and inclusion” (Participant 2).

The CR-S Framework was discussed as a helpful tool in supporting leaders with this work: “We’ve had some PDs that we’ve offered on conference days that some of our administrators have used portions of this for those professional development sessions”

(Participant 5). Participant 3 further discussed the CR-S Framework and its ability to support capacity building in leaders:

So, one of the reasons for selecting it was that additionally, this is about capacity building, right? So, the framework is good on the surface, but if people don't understand it, then it stays at the surface level. So, I have assistant superintendents that while they can, they understand the gist of the framework, they themselves have to build their own capacity around what it means to be an anti-racist leader, what it means to truly reallocate resources based on need...be aware where your deficiencies and gaps in your own knowledge, in the ability to lead this work.

### ***Category 3: The Role of Stakeholders***

The third category, *the role of stakeholders*, emerged as participants shared how various stakeholder groups are contributing to the implementation of the CR-S Framework and the overall efforts at mitigating inequities within their school districts. The two themes that were identified under this category include: (a) "You actually formed the taskforce and we're actually doing the plan" (Participant 1), and (b) "We're really trying to elevate student voice" (Participant 4).

**"You Actually Formed the Taskforce and We're Actually Doing the Plan"** (Participant 1). The first theme within the role of stakeholders emerged as several district leaders shared the importance of expressing their commitment to equity by forming diverse committees focused on implementing the CR-S Framework and addressing equity and diversity issues within their school districts as a whole. As Participant 1 shared when discussing some perceptions expressed by district staff regarding the taskforce: "You actually formed the taskforce and we're actually doing the

plan, so I think people feel like there's a commitment there and that we're actually going to follow through." This commitment was also communicated through the board of education: "The entire board of education has stood behind the diversity task force. They said that it's a priority" (Participant 1).

Participant 6 also discussed the various committees engaged in this work: "We have established a cultural responsiveness committee at the district level and each building also has a cultural responsiveness committee at the building level." Participant 6 further elaborated on why two types of committees had been formed:

We have a cultural responsiveness committee at the district. There are students that sit on that, they're community members that sit on that, and those individuals are going to discuss some of the priorities within those buildings and every building may have different circumstances and different issues. At one building, it might be this is an issue; at another building, it might be this.

The scope of how equity, inclusion, and diversity committees have been formed and their various roles was evident in the range of district leader responses. "Layers" of equity committees were shared by Participant 4:

We have three layers of equity committees that we have in our district. We have district equity, building equity, and student equity teams and all of them are, you know, using the framework as a tool and what we term as disrupting and dismantling inequity within our system.

Participants shared the ways in which their committees are examining how to mitigate inequities between their White and Black students. As Participant 1 shared when discussing racial inequities: "overrepresentation in special education and under-

representation in advanced courses...so that's something that we're just starting to look at that as part of our diversity taskforce." Participant 1 further elaborated on the implementation of the CR-S Framework through a district taskforce: "So we plan on using it with the diversity taskforce...because it wasn't being done consistently. Everyone wasn't even aware of it." Furthermore, actions taken to provide learning opportunities for different stakeholder groups were shared by Participant 1:

We're basically taking our strategic plan and going through it with them with the lens of equity and inclusion and diversity. So, we're going to be updating and revising that. We're currently forming all of our stakeholder groups and going through some PD and training just for the teams in terms of diversity and equity.

Ensuring a diverse representation on committees and in all equity work was emphasized by Participant 6: "The more people that you can involve, the better you are. Everybody has to have a seat at the table." Participant 6 further discussed the importance of everyone having "a seat at the table" during the interview:

We've got to do more...everyone has to feel as though that they have a seat at the table, that they're treated equally, and we have to ensure that happens. And in the event that it doesn't, it's our responsibility as an educational institution that as our students come through K-12, they learn the importance of diversity and cultural responsiveness.

Committees have also focused on ways in which to obtain stakeholder input regarding implementing the principles outlined in the CR-Framework: "Part of the framework, it talks about having a school climate survey in terms of the welcoming environment...they helped us deliver, develop a climate survey" (Participant 1).



Participant 4 also discussed the use of a climate survey, which is a recommendation embedded within the CR-S Framework:

Number one is creating an inclusive environment, right? I would just say that's a space that we're looking at. Do our families feel welcome? Do they feel connected? And do they see themselves upon entering the building as this being a safe space for them? We take climate and culture surveys with our students to how they feel in relation to their connections to teachers and staff.

When discussing the importance of a range of stakeholders in implementing action steps to address equity, Participant 6 summed up the importance of this: "The whole idea is to make sure that everyone is included, everything that we do is equitable, and that we celebrate our diversity, and we actually view it as a positive."

**"We're Really Trying to Elevate Student Voice" (Participant 4).** District leaders shared the ways in which they are elevating student voice in decision-making and identifying ways in which student voices are often not being included or heard throughout their districts. Elevating student voice is an integral part of the CR-S Framework and an area that many participants felt was extremely important. Participant 4 shared how the district is examining representation of students in various programs and classes to ensure representation of diverse student voice:

I just looked at the cultural arts program and see, okay, who's participating, right? Who's participating in higher level courses? All those elements are things that we do that fall into the lens of equity and support the efforts that we're doing universally. I think we're really trying to elevate student voice and I think that's really important.

Participant 4 further elaborated on the district's efforts to elevate student voice: We formed an equity committee which was, I want to say, it's a year process almost, a year process of various stakeholders including students that came out with...a specific course of recommendations...district building and student equity committee members.

Participant 5 also shared the district's focus on ensuring a diverse representation of students on committees: "We have a Dignity for All committee...when I became superintendent, I wanted kids on the committee, so we brought representation of kids, not just African America, but Latino, LGBTQ."

Efforts to include the voices of a diverse group of students who had previously attended a school district were also shared:

We are also working with a community group of former students...and they are very diverse. There are individuals that went through our school district and I, along with the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction have been meeting with them on a monthly basis to discuss some of their concerns that they've had, that they had when they were students here, and they have been making suggestions to us about things that maybe they encountered or things that they're aware of. (Participant 6)

Participant 6 further shared additional avenues to elicit student voice, such as informal conversations with students where they can share their feelings and opinions about equity issues:

We encourage that type of discussion among our students. It's a safe spot. There's a faculty member in there again that's trained to be able to handle this; faculty

member does not give their opinion one way or another, they just serve as a facilitator. They give students the opportunity to talk and nine times out of 10 times, it works very, very well.

#### ***Category 4: Disproportionality***

The fourth category, *disproportionality*, emerged as participants shared the ways in which the CR-S Framework is supporting their conversations and actions aimed at addressing disproportionate outcomes between subgroups of students, including those evident between their White and Black student populations. The two themes that were identified under this category include: (a) “We’ve been chasing the achievement gap for years” (Participant 4), and (b) “Make our responses more therapeutic and less punitive” (Participant 6).

#### **“We’ve Been Chasing the Achievement Gap for Years” (Participant 4).**

Participants shared inequities between their White and Black students as it relates to achievement and their use of the CR-S Framework to begin conversations about ways to address these inequities. Participant 4 shared:

We’ve been chasing the achievement gap for years, right?...and we noticed very clearly that there is a discrepancy between the performance of our White versus our Black and Brown students, and we own that. We’re not necessarily proud of the fact that we’re not seeing the same levels of achievement across the board.

When discussing inequities between student populations in the school district, Participant 2 shared: “There was still significant gap between our students of color, students living in poverty, students with disabilities when compared to their White counterparts.” Participant 5 discussed the High Expectations and Rigorous Instruction

principle that is identified in the CR-S Framework, sharing the underrepresentation of Black students: “Why is it that we’re underrepresented by race in all of our high level classes? Why is that happening? So, it will be a continued goal of ours, but we’re definitely disproportionate there.” Participant 5 also shared underrepresentation of Black students in “a lot of our AP IB courses,” while Participant 1 shared underrepresentation of Black students “advanced classes in general.” Participant 5 further explained the thinking around problem-solving this issue of having students of color enrolled in lower numbers in higher level classes: “Where are we going wrong? Are the counselors not explaining it well?...access in equity; it is a little broader than race, but it definitely is inclusive of race.”

Some participants discussed making changes in curriculum as a way to address achievement gaps between White and Black students. As Participant 3 shared: “We are looking at ELA and math curriculum and saying, when we put the framework against our curriculum, our ELA curriculum, where does it land? Is it culturally responsive?” Another participant discussed a “curriculum audit” that the school district has been engaged in through the office of instruction (Participant 5).

The issue of inequities being a systemic problem were discussed, as it relates to curriculum and instruction:

We’ve recognized where our gaps are and we’re recognizing that it’s a systemic issue, and we’re recognizing that it’s coming from a sense of not belonging and exclusion. So, we’re doing our best to center the experience of those young people in those cultures in our curriculum development, assessment work, in our instructional pedagogies...it’s going to take a significant amount of time, but

we're starting from an understanding and a mindset that's where we need to build it from, which is different from what we've done in the past when we've built our curriculum. (Participant 2)

Participant 1 discussed a culturally responsive rubric for evaluating curriculum that the school district has adopted from a higher education institution, sharing: "We're actually going through all of our English texts at the high school. We put a team together. We're going to be using that rubric to make some recommendations of maybe replacing some texts."

**"Make our Responses More Therapeutic and Less Punitive" (Participant 6).**

Several participants discussed the power of relationships, which is emphasized in the CR-S Framework, in decreasing disproportionality in discipline specifically for students of color. As Participant 3 described when discussing school districts:

They know their issues. They know there are disparities. They might not be able to talk about it concretely with great detail, right? But, do they believe and do they know and understand that Black and Brown boys are disproportionately suspended than their peers?...most communities know that data.

Participant 3 continued: "I think the work really is about classroom instruction and classroom relationships, which is the connection to the framework. Participant 4 also shared disproportionality in suspensions within the school district: "We still see more Black and Brown students being suspended...than other subgroups...definitely discipline is a space that I can speak to very specifically and it's predominantly Black males."

Another participant explained the connection of the district's use of restorative practices and the CR-S Framework:

We've been cited several times for our middle school and high school male African American students who have been suspended...we have moved probably at least 7, 8 years ago to becoming restorative...I wouldn't say it was because of this document, but it certainly connects to this document. (Participant 5)

The connection between restorative practices and relationships was further emphasized by another district leader:

We are having restorative conversations. We are forcing back the conversation of what's your relationships with this student? Why did this happen? Why do you think it happened? Because you don't have a relationship with the student. If you did have a relationship, do you think that student would have been kicked out of your class?...no...build the relationship, share a little of yourself, let them share with you. If you come to a better understanding of the person, we can try to prevent some of these things that are happening. (Participant 5)

Restorative practices were also referred to by another school district leader when discussing responses to discipline: "We did a number of initiatives involving restorative practices...we changed our code of conduct to make our responses more therapeutic and less punitive" (Participant 6).

Participant 6 also explained the district's response to disproportionality in discipline by strengthening relationships: "Through developing those positive relationships with those students and families, there was so much more of an understanding and people worked as a team, as opposed to someone who may have a preconceived notion." The emphasis on this by the school district was described: "I would say we did more than encourage our staff, we implored, I think is the right word,

our staff to become more familiar and develop positive working relationships with the students and the families” (Participant 6).

A focus on changing the mindset of school staff when addressing the discipline of students was offered as a strategy that can be effective: “Developing the positive relationships, improving the behavior, and I would even say changing the mindset of the staff in regard to disciplinary issues, I think is what put us more in proportion with those struggling populations” (Participant 6).

## **Focus Area 2: Challenges and Barriers**

### ***Category 5: Familiarity With the CR-S Framework***

The fifth category, *familiarity with the CR-S Framework*, emerged as participants shared the challenges that have arisen with regard to communication about the framework to school districts across New York State, communication within districts, and the time required to ensure consistent understanding of the framework. The one theme that was identified under this category is: (a) “Are you actually providing the space and time to roll it out?” (Participant 1).

#### **“Are You Actually Providing the Time and Space to Roll This Out?”**

**(Participant 1).** While district leaders shared the ways in which their school districts are aligning their equity efforts with the CR-S Framework, several acknowledged that they are at the beginning stages of its use, due in part to how they became aware of the framework:

I don’t think anyone did a great job of communicating out that this resource was available, so right now, we’re working on communication strategies for this resource and others on how do we promote?...how do we build a portfolio or a

folder that educators can easily access that gives quick descriptions and details about what this is and how it can be used? So, I think that a very specific communication strategy is going to be important for us to get this tool out.

(Participant 2)

Participant 2 further elaborated on the early communication about the CR-S Framework: “It was literally me hearing about it randomly. It was not rolled out systematically from our state.” Another district leader also shared that the district is in the early stages of aligning their equity work with the CR-S Framework, sharing: “I would say it’s not something that’s been shared with the whole district or that all departments have even seen it” (Participant 1). This sentiment was reinforced by Participant 3, who indicated: “We’re still in the early stages of full adoption and what that actually looks like from a context standpoint.” In addition, Participant 6, when asked about the CR-S Framework, shared: “We’re in the formative stages, we’re developing the foundation...the cultural responsiveness, cultural diversity, recognizing, honoring cultures, has got to be part and parcel of what we do every day.”

As district leaders indicated that they are just becoming acquainted with the CR-S Framework, they emphasized the importance for staff to also have time to review and become familiar with the framework as Participant 4 shared:

Quite honestly, it’s really well done. But I question if everyone’s had the time to really go in and study it the way that some have, and maybe others just haven’t had a chance, but should and then to understand the relevancy around, you know, the applications of the framework.

In addition to expressing appreciation for the CR-S Framework, the time needed



to review and understand it in order to ensure effective implementation was acknowledged by another participant:

Every district should really be looking at this as sort of the core of their work.

And I think that it would be helpful for everyone to really understand that and to understand the framework and to be given the time to go through it to understand the content...it's a powerful document. (Participant 4)

The issue of the time needed to support staff in understanding the CR-S

Framework was further elaborated on by Participant 1:

Districts are good at kind of saying, this is something that's coming out and you need to be aware of this and sharing it, but are you actually providing the space and time to roll it out to people and talk about what it means and how you're going to implement it?

### ***Category 6: Uncomfortable Change***

The sixth category, *uncomfortable change*, contained input from all participants about the issues that arise when implementing change that is consistent with the principles identified in the CR-S Framework. The two themes that were identified under this category include: (a) "The challenge is to get people to acknowledge that it's a real problem" (Participant 5), and (b) "There are some people who are still very, very resistant" (Participant 6).

**"The Challenge is to Get People to Acknowledge That it's a Real Problem" (Participant 5).** While one district leader cited "competing priorities...multiple resources" as a barrier to implementing the CR-S Framework (Participant 2), a lack of understanding and acceptance on the part of staff regarding why equity needs to be

addressed within their school districts was expressed by many. Barriers to implementation often include people expressing that they don't feel that their district has issues with equity that need to be addressed, resulting in negative reactions to this work.

Participant 5 expressed concerns about "White privilege":

The challenge is to get people to acknowledge that it's a real problem because I do think that some people think it's just the problem of the day, as opposed to a real problem. And I do think that we do have a lot of natural implicit bias so people feel defensive, so if we were to say White privilege, people lose their minds.

Participant 6 shared similar concerns:

There unfortunately are still some people that they do not want to have the difficult conversations and do not see it as an issue. That's the reality of it from my perspective. And I think it's important for us to continue to educate those people that it is an issue, here's why it's an issue, and here's what we need to do to make sure that everything is equitable.

Later in the interview, Participant 6 revisited this topic: "I still think there are some people who don't really, really see it as an issue." Participant 4 shared these concerns as well when asked about any challenges experienced when implementing the CR-S Framework:

It's not about the technical, it's the mindset, right? The why behind the work, sometimes overt, sometimes covert, and that's really the push, right? But at the same time, it's probably the most important work we're doing...just because of my diverse district doesn't mean if I was a homogenous district, we shouldn't be

doing it. Some folks, you know, gravitate and say, well, it's a diverse district so they should be doing it, right? When it should be, every district should be, right? The framework is actually for all districts, not you know, the culturally responsive framework for diverse districts versus homogeneous, right? But I would say the pushback if there were any is that of mindset and maybe you know, an unwillingness to accept its importance, I guess for lack of a better word, universally...there are some that are going to push and question.

Several participants also shared the role of bias and the discomfort experienced by some individuals that impacts the work of implementing the CR-S Framework and its inherent principles. As Participant 3 shared:

Teachers...felt uncomfortable...I started to hear the buzz of why are we doing this?...teachers and the adults have to check their White privilege and they have to learn how to be anti-racist and they have to understand how their biases serve as mental models for their work.

Participant 6 expanded on the presence of bias in educators:

The students are generally not the ones that have these biases or issues. It's generally the adults. The students get it. Our younger population gets it. Some of the people that are older either don't necessarily get it or they don't want to get it, to be quite frank.

In addition to bias, one school district leader shared how staff do not seem to see why the principles of the CR-Framework should be addressed, as they feel that their district does not have an issue with equity:

One of the barriers is people either not being aware, or they're aware but they

haven't really looked at it and don't see how it fits or how it's different, right?

Well, we HAVE rigorous instruction and we ARE inclusive in our classrooms.

(Participant 1)

**“There Are Some People Who Are Still Very, Very Resistant” (Participant 6).**

In addition to some individuals who have demonstrated bias or uncomfortable feelings as it relates to implementation of the principles in the CR-S Framework, participants also shared that some staff members can be extremely defensive and directly oppose equity efforts. As Participant 2 shared:

If you have one part of the community that feels like they are being marginalized, even though they may have many privileges, they will put a halt to some of this work. So, if your board is not with you or they're not informed, it won't go anywhere. If there's certain populations, certain communities who don't understand or realize that some of these initiatives are happening, they will put a halt to it.

Participant 2 elaborated later in the interview about the importance of including everyone in the communication regarding equity initiatives and ensuring opportunities for them to become involved:

With a lack of information, folks only get defensive. They think about what privileges they're going to be giving up because everyone, to do equity work, everyone's giving up some privileges and without having folks understand and be a part of the process to develop the approach or the initiative, folks are just going to be defensive in fear of their privileges being lost before they truly understand and what we're attempting to do.

Participant 1 also shared people's reactions to equity work that may cause resistance: "People don't want to name that it's an issue. I think they feel like it's a reflection on them and their fault if it's named as an issue...they feel like you're saying that they're doing something wrong."

Experiencing defensiveness on the part of staff was discussed specifically as it relates to Black students being referred more for additional services or special education: "Even though you're not pointing at them directly, I think there's a lot of defensiveness because when we're talking about lack of inclusion or equity for Black students, most of the teachers are White" (Participant 1).

Challenges pertaining to some individuals not being ready to engage in professional development on topics presented in the CR-S Framework were shared:

Where I'm at now, my development as a leader is there are just certain things that need to happen, and that might mean we don't have a lot of buy-in up front, right? So, for instance the framework, the culturally responsive professional learning that we're engaged in, we need to do it. Our country is experiencing massive civil unrest, right? Why would I wait until everyone's ready? The truth is a lot of people aren't going to be ready. This is uncomfortable work. So, I've decided we're doing it, whether you're ready or not, and I'll get the buy-in later when we get results. (Participant 3)

One participant shared being questioned about why the district leader was trying to implement this work and experiencing resistance about the term "White privilege" that was discussed with staff:

This White privilege, I mean, I've never had people in my face, you know, telling

me I shouldn't be the superintendent of this district. How dare I? And you know, there was a White man who probably made you the superintendent and the only reason you are here is because of a White man. How dare you?...what do we take for granted that others cannot take for granted? That's what we're talking about. But this term White privilege...you got to come up with a new word because that is problematic. (Participant 5)

Participant 6 seemed to summarize many points made by district leaders regarding resistance to equity conversations and initiatives:

I think we've made some strides, but we've still got a ways to go because there are some people who are still very, very resistant. You know, they think everything's fine and it's not. We have to continue to implore them and tell them and remind them and make it part of what we do.

A few district leaders directly addressed their understanding on why resistance can increase based on the ways in which districts embark on this work. When everyone is not included in equity efforts, it was noted that challenges can arise in advancing equity. One participant emphasized the importance of including everyone in these efforts: "I've seen equity work go wrong when people are just, I'm going to work with my board or I'm just going to work with the equity and inclusion committee" (Participant 2). The importance of everyone's involvement was also emphasized by Participant 3: "Everyone from the custodian all the way up to senior executives. Everyone's a part of the culturally responsive work."

The importance of courage was also a theme that district leaders addressed. One participant passionately emphasized feelings about the importance of courage when discussing resistance from others:

This requires courage because people are going to push back and they're going to give you every reason why, you know, we shouldn't be doing this...it does require courage. I mean, you don't have the courage to do the work when people push back, you're in trouble, and that's where initiatives die. (Participant 3)

### **Focus Area 3: Approaches and Strategies**

#### ***Category 7: Diversity of Action***

The final category, *diversity of action*, emerged as participants shared their ideas for additional approaches and strategies to implement the CR-S Framework effectively to address inequities within their school districts, including those between their White and Black student populations. Some of these strategies are directly in response to challenges experienced and others are efforts by school districts to be proactive in their approach to equity efforts. The two themes that were identified under this category include: (a) "Make sure that our kids see themselves reflected in the educators" (Participant 4), and (b) "I think people are talking too much and not doing enough" (Participant 3).

**"Make Sure That Our Kids See Themselves Reflected in the Educators"** (Participant 4). This theme emerged as several district leaders shared concerns about the lack of diversity in their district staff compared to their student population and the challenges with equity efforts when staff is not diverse. One participant shared that this is an area of focus for the district:

I think our hiring practices is an effort that we're really pushing hard to make sure that we have a diverse staff to support the work that we're doing across the board, and to make sure that our kids see themselves reflected in the educators that we have in our building. (Participant 4)

Participant 6 shared similar concerns about the lack of diversity in staff and efforts by the school district: "There's much work to be done in that regard. Our staffing does not mirror our population." Further explanation was provided about the benefits of having a diverse staff that mirrors the student population in order to bring in different viewpoints:

In those buildings that have diverse populations, you're starting to see much more of their embracing the cultural responsiveness and cultural diversity and equity piece because it involves many, many more of their students. Fortunately, we've also been able to hire staff members in those buildings that are more diverse as well. So, they come in and they bring a whole another perspective that at least in this district over the years, we have not had...we try to seek out individuals that are diverse and put them in our applicant pool. (Participant 6)

Participant 6 elaborated later in the interview: "We continue looking for diverse candidates through our human resources office." When discussing the CR-S Framework, Participant 1 shared the use of the framework to support the district's emphasis on increasing diversity through the hiring process: "There's a lot of push in the community in terms of hiring and diversity among staff...use pieces of that and just the process and see if there's ways it can be applied because it is the focus area for us."

**"I Think People are Talking too Much and not Doing Enough" (Participant**



3). The final theme focuses on the numerous ways that district leaders shared the importance of engaging in equity efforts, implementing the CR-S Framework, and ensuring that this work moves from conversation to action. As Participant 3 summed up: “Obviously, New York school districts are in various places as it relates to the framework.” Participant 3 further shared his thoughts on ensuring that equity work moves beyond conversations about data to action steps:

Where this work gets stuck, in my opinion, is that people focus on the data, now it’s important, but I feel like we need a new entry into making sure the work becomes sustainable...when you stay at the data level, then it’s just a lot of talking, right? So, I’ve adopted this mantra of moving from rhetoric to action. I think people are talking too much and not doing enough.

Participant 3 further elaborated on the importance of moving beyond data discussions: “Spend less time talking about the data and more time implementing something, whether it’s the framework, whether it’s an equity policy, whether it’s looking at grading policies....”

One district leader shared thoughts on the continued responsibility of those in leadership roles in addressing inequities:

In some places, it’s going to move quickly and in other places, it’s not going to move as quickly, and it’s our responsibility in those places where it doesn’t move as quickly...to implore those individuals to get involved and participate and make a positive difference because as I said, we have to have equity, equity for all.

(Participant 6)

Participant 4 shared similar thoughts on the messages that district leaders need to

send regarding the importance of prioritizing addressing inequities in education:

“Everyone keeps saying, you know, there’s so much stuff on the plate, but this IS the plate...this is what holds everything up...it’s not an initiative, nor should it be looked at as an initiative by a district.”

Two participants used similar analogies when discussing the effort and emphasis that needs to be placed on this work. As Participant 2 shared: “I think we all need that person who’s going to have their foot on the gas all the time.” Participant 3 also discussed a similar sentiment and shared a perspective on change in an organization in relation to staff “buy-in” in mitigating inequities:

We’re not going to take our foot off the pedal...I’m starting to be a believer that there’s two ways to address change, right? And this is sort of my evolution as a leader, my journey. I used to think that you had to get all the buy-in upfront. Now, what do we know about that school of thought? Well, it means you have more people with you, right? Why do you want all that buy-in upfront? Because you need that momentum. I also know, waiting to get a lot of buy-in upfront means you’re going to slow things down, things that are really important. So, if you’re going to wait for everyone to buy in first, like yes, we’re willing to do this, there are some pros and cons to that.

Relationships were also identified as extremely important in this work, as shared By Participant 3, who made the connection with student learning:

When we make the nexus of impact the relationship between teacher, student, content...when you look at the nexus of impact, I think that’s where we should focus our work...making sure that relationship between the triangle is culturally

responsive. I have a feeling that is where the work is really going to make the most impact.

Several participants shared actionable steps that their school districts are planning on taking using the CR-S Framework as a guide:

If I were to say...which parts of the framework we're going to prioritize, I would say it's the ongoing professional learning and support and the curriculum piece.

So, just as we look at what does rigorous instruction look like, what does culturally responsive curriculum look like and instruction? I would say those are probably the two that we are going to go much deeper with. (Participant 3)

Another participant discussed plans to revisit the CR-S Framework: "Looking at the document in those categories...and just cross-referencing to make sure that we're meeting some of those areas...What do we have? What are we missing? What should we be doing?" (Participant 5)

Participant 6 echoed plans to utilize the CR-S Framework as the district moves forward with equity efforts:

We've talked about the document and some of the strategies in there...we're using it as a framework for what we do. Why reinvent the wheel when it's out there... if there are certain suggestions or certain recommendations or ideologies that, you know, we need to follow to make this work, then we're certainly going to do that.

Participant 5 also described using the framework to guide next steps: "We actually used the document and read it, did a jigsaw, made action steps and goals based on it."

As the CR-S Framework specifically encourages district leaders to engage in reviews of policies, several district leaders shared how the framework is guiding this work: “We are doing a lot of policy work. We’ve built our own policy analysis tool and approach to make our policies more loving and culturally responsive and inclusive...the policy work is happening” (Participant 2). Participant 5 elaborated on the district’s plans for policy work in the future, sharing the role of the board of education:

We’ve added goals as a result of this focus and trying to move forward, so that’s kind of where the board has played a role. A role we need to do is to look at the lens of cultural responsiveness in our policies, and we’ve not created an isolated policy for that at this point, but it is something that will be part of our systemic plan.

When asked about mitigating inequities between White and Black student populations, policy work was further discussed: “So what does that look like from an implementation standpoint? It looks like the board of ed creating an equity policy, that looks like the board of ed setting equity goals and anti-racist goals.” (Participant 3)

The ways in which the CR-S Framework supports a systemic approach to equity emerged in the responses by several district leaders: “We need kind of that systemic plan...over the next 1 to 2 to 3 to 4 years” (Participant 5). Participant 6 also discussed the importance of considering all of the cultures within the school district and making systemic changes: “We have a tremendous amount of different cultures within our school district, and we need to recognize, celebrate, and honor all of those cultures.” He further commented: “It’s not a program...it’s changing a system, and we’re in the process of starting to do that.”

Furthermore, Participant 4 shared the need for a systemic approach rather than looking to the district leader to be the one impacting change independently:

I think what we're working towards is not the readiness, but creating systems to support the work. The framework can come and go if you don't have a system to come back and revisit and that's really our effort...it shouldn't be so much relying on the leader, but it becomes part of your culture and...the structures are there to support it.

Embedding aspects of the CR-S Framework into district strategic plans to ensure a systemic approach was shared, with an emphasis on ensuring the plan is implemented with fidelity:

So, we just finished up one strategic plan. Now we're starting a new one. And in the new plan, we specifically call out culturally responsive teaching, like that is the priority in the plan, right? Now if you know anything about strategic plans, where most of them die is that all the effort is spent on creating a plan and it's kind of like the proverbial binder that sits on a shelf and collects dust. We align our budget with the plan, so if we're going to do all this work...then your budget has to support that. (Participant 3)

When discussing next steps, two participants shared their district's plans to hire someone to lead equity efforts within their districts. As Participant 1 shared: "We just spent some time drafting a job description for an executive director of diversity, equity, and inclusion that we're hoping to hire for next year." Participant 1 further described this position:

The executive director position I think is huge...we value it. We want to do the right thing, but we need help. We need someone who has the training and the expertise and the background to make sure that things are getting done.

A second district leader shared plans to hire someone to lead this work: "I've already budgeted for a director of equity and it won't necessarily be all equity...but about 80% of that position will be equity, racial sensitivity, cultural diversity" (Participant 6). However, Participant 2 shared the importance of not relying on one individual to do this work:

I would just underscore...and to stress that there needs to be some champions...some instructional leaders outside of the district leader who will usher this, inspire folks, have it as a focus. We don't have that special person or persons, we've embedded it into everyone's responsibilities.

Some district leaders shared thoughts on ways that NYSED can support the implementation of the CR-S Framework with the provision of examples of this work to support district leaders:

For me as an administrator...I think it'd be really helpful to have concrete steps or examples in terms of I don't want to say ways to implement it, but how can you integrate it just to be a part of, so it doesn't feel like something separate?  
(Participant 1)

Suggestions for next steps from NYSED regarding the expectations of the implementation of the CR-S Framework were also shared:

The expectation that it should be reviewed and understood, and that there should be a plan and some form of a plan around it. I'm not calling for a mandate

because I think that's not the intent and it just turns it, it shifts the mindset around...some folks tell you, you have to do it versus seeing and understanding the purity and the why behind it. I think it should be referred to more often because I think it can just linger and it's been out for some period of time.

(Participant 4)

Participant 4 also further recommended providing models of effective implementation of the CR-S Framework:

If we don't go back and revisit it, it just becomes a really nice document on a shelf and I think we need to show and provide models of how that's done...you got to bring it back, you got to bring it back, if in fact it is something you value.

### **Summary of Results**

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore and understand the ways in which district leaders are implementing the NYSED CR-S Education Framework in mitigating inequities between their White and Black student populations. The seven categories and 13 themes that emerged from the data were organized by focus areas aligned with the three research questions that guided this study. The first focus area, implementation of the CR-S Framework, includes the following categories and themes: the first category, *providing a starting point*, incorporates the two themes of: (a) "Make sure we're in alignment with the framework" and (b) "This is a difficult conversation to have, but it's necessary." The second category, *professional development*, incorporates two themes: (a) "What can we do ongoing to embed these pieces into all of the PD that we offer?" and (b) "Empower our staff to lead those professional developments." The third category, *the role of stakeholders*, incorporates the following two themes: (a) "You

actually formed the taskforce and we're actually doing the plan" and (b) "We're really trying to elevate student voice." The fourth category, *disproportionality*, incorporates the two themes of: (a) "We've been chasing the achievement gap for years" and (b) "Make our responses more therapeutic and less punitive."

The second focus area, challenges and barriers, incorporates two categories. The first category, *familiarity with the CR-S Framework*, incorporates the following theme: (a) "Are you actually providing the space and time to roll it out?" The second category, *uncomfortable change*, incorporates two themes: (a) "The challenge is to get people to acknowledge that it's a real problem" and (b) "There are some people who are still very, very resistant."

The final focus area, approaches and strategies, includes the category, *diversity of action*, which includes two themes: (a) "Make sure our kids see themselves reflected in the educators" and (b) "I think people are talking too much and not doing enough."

All categories and themes were relevant to the equity efforts and experiences of six school district leaders in implementing the CR-S Education Framework to advance equity within school districts in New York State. Specific information regarding how the CR-S Education Framework is being implemented to mitigate inequities between Black and White student populations was included in themes, when applicable.

Chapter 4 reviewed the categories and themes that emerged from the data. The final chapter, Chapter 5, will provide a summary and interpretation of the study's findings, in addition to describing the study's limitations, implications of the results, and recommendations for consideration.



## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **Introduction**

This chapter summarizes the results of the research study that explored the ways in which school district leaders are implementing the NYSED CR-S Education Framework in mitigating inequities between their White and Black student populations. Implications of the findings are discussed, in addition to the limitations of the study and recommendations for further consideration.

The purpose of this study was to explore the practices of district leaders in implementing the NYSED CR-S Education Framework in mitigating inequities between their White and Black student populations, barriers and challenges their school districts have experienced regarding implementation, and approaches and strategies employed to overcome challenges. Information from this study adds to the literature focusing on advancing educational equity. This study also provides the first empirical examination of school district leaders' experiences with implementing the CR-S Education Framework, which was released by NYSED in 2019.

The research questions used to guide the study are:

1. As reported by district leaders of public school districts in New York State who self-identify as implementing the New York State Education Department (NYSED) Culturally Responsive-Sustaining (CR-S) Education Framework to some extent, to what degree and in what ways is the framework being implemented to mitigate racial inequities between their Black and White student populations?
2. As reported by district leaders of public school districts in New York State who self-identify as implementing the CR-S Framework to some extent, what barriers and challenges are impacting the implementation of this framework in mitigating racial inequities between their Black and White student populations?
3. As reported by district leaders of public school districts in New York State who self-identify as implementing the CR-S Framework to some extent, what approaches or strategies can be used in order to alleviate barriers and challenges and implement the framework in mitigating racial inequities between their Black and White student populations?

A qualitative descriptive study captured the information regarding the experiences and actions of six school district leaders regarding the implementation of the CR-S Framework, which unveiled the development of categories and themes organized by three focus areas aligned with the three research questions identified in the study.

### **Implications of Findings**

This study provides insight into seven categories that emerged from the study: providing a starting point, professional development, the role of stakeholders,

disproportionality, familiarity with the CR-S Framework, uncomfortable change, and diversity of action. The categories were further broken down into 13 themes that emerged from the responses provided by district leaders. Direct quotes from participants were chosen as theme titles to provide powerful insight into the words chosen by district leaders when discussing the use of the CR-S Framework in their equity efforts.

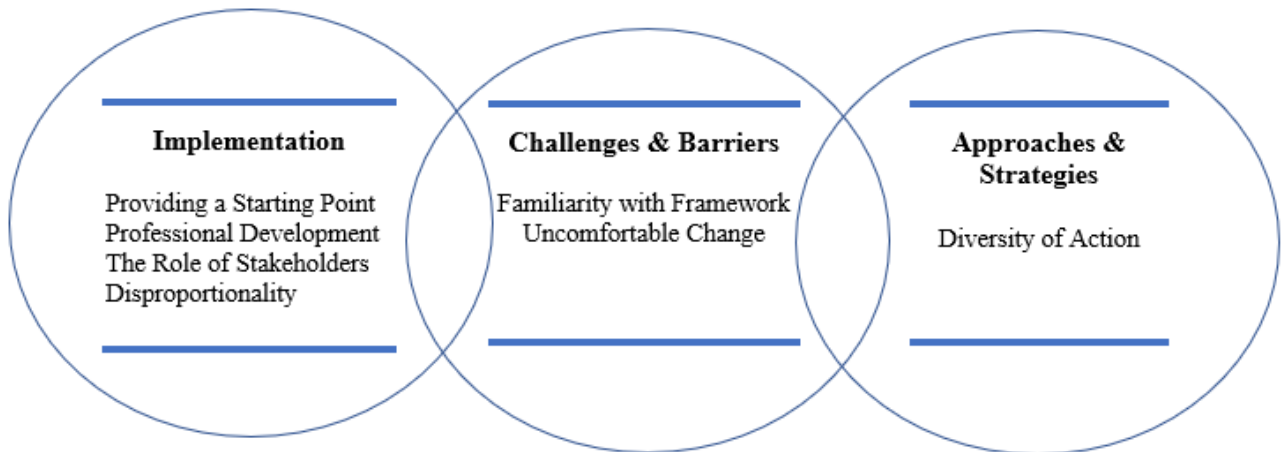
The first focus area, aligned with Research Question 1, includes four categories regarding the implementation of the CR-S Framework. The first category, providing a starting point, incorporates two themes: (a) “Make sure we’re in alignment with the Framework” and (b) “This is a difficult conversation to have, but it’s necessary.” The second category, professional development, incorporates two themes: (a) “What can we do ongoing to embed these pieces into all of the PD that we offer?” and (b) “Empower our staff to lead those professional developments.” The third category, the role of stakeholders, incorporates two themes: (a) “You actually formed the taskforce and we’re actually doing the plan” and (b) “We’re really trying to elevate student voice.” The fourth category, disproportionality, incorporates two themes: (a) “We’ve been chasing the achievement gap for years” and (b) “Make our responses more therapeutic and less punitive.”

The second focus area, aligned with Research Question 2, includes two categories related to challenges and barriers. The fifth category, familiarity with the CR-S Framework, captured one theme related to challenges presented regarding effective communication and time needed to understand the framework: (a) “Are you actually providing the space and time to roll it out?” The sixth category, uncomfortable change, captured the thoughts and feelings from participants regarding the difficulties inherent in

implementing change and includes two themes: (a) “The challenge is to get people to acknowledge that it’s a real problem” and (b) “There are some people who are still very, very resistant.”

The third focus area, aligned with Research Question 3, includes one category capturing the spirit of responses by participants regarding their approaches and strategies to overcoming challenges in implementing the CR-S Framework and mitigating inequities in general within their school districts. This seventh and final category, diversity of action, incorporates two themes: (a) “Make sure our kids see themselves reflected in the educators” and (b) “I think people are talking too much and not doing enough.” A model depicting the focus areas and categories within each is represented in Figure 5.1.

*Figure 5.1 Focus Areas and Categories*



**Focus Area 1: Implementation of CR-S Framework**

### ***Category 1: Providing a Starting Point***

Although all participants expressed positive feelings about the CR-S Framework and its usefulness, it was evident that their responses reflected a common feeling of being unsure as to where to begin implementation. The range in implementation strategies and timelines shared by participants regarding the CR-S Framework suggests the need for clear messaging to school district leaders about expectations regarding implementation. The flexibility inherent in the CR-S Framework may be viewed as both an advantage and a disadvantage, as it allows for school districts to choose which areas to focus on within their districts, how to address these areas, and when to address them; however, it also leads to a lack of clarity regarding where and how to begin. A lack of specific guidelines or timelines could be problematic for school districts who do not have an equity-focused leader committed to this work and therefore, do not follow the guidelines for implementation of the CR-S Framework.

Additionally, as some participants discussed using the CR-S Framework as a reference to check if the action steps they are already taking align with the framework, it is being used as both a guiding document and a reference for previous equity efforts. Although participants expressed the usefulness of the framework in this endeavor, others shared the challenges posed, as some staff believe that the framework is not necessary to use if they feel that they are already using some of the strategies identified. This further suggests the need for clear messaging about expectations regarding the implementation of the CR-S Framework.

Participants discussed a principle of the CR-S Framework, creating welcoming and affirming environments, often when sharing their implementation strategies. This

principle has been identified as one of the core principles in the CR-S Framework. Participant stories about how they are creating welcoming environments included increasing family engagement, building trust with families, connecting families to community agencies, and creating a welcoming center; these align with suggestions provided within the CR-S Framework (NYSED, 2019). Examples provided also validate the work of Khalifa et al. (2016) who identifies actions including ensuring inclusive school environments and engaging diverse students and families as essential culturally responsive school leadership practices. The need to create a welcoming climate is a key factor in disrupting injustices in schools (Theoharis, 2010).

An unanticipated finding is that not all participants discussed the principle of creating welcoming and affirming environments or the importance of addressing this as a first step in equity efforts. Some participants shared specific strategies regarding curriculum, equity committees, and instruction without addressing the need to create welcoming environments in all schools first. This speaks to the flexibility of the framework in how school districts are utilizing it but suggests a lack of consistent understanding about how each principle connects and cannot be addressed in isolation from the others in a systemic approach to equity.

Acknowledgment of the challenges inherent in having difficult conversations was evident throughout interviews, especially as it relates to conversations about race that arise when introducing and discussing the CR-S Framework. Participants shared that they are working to ensure that conversations regarding the four principles in the CR-S Framework are taking place in order to increase understanding and implementation, despite the challenges that have arisen. Reflections from district leaders are consistent

with Singleton (2015) who emphasizes the importance of courageous conversations about race for all members of a school community to engage in.

Although they shared their personal willingness to be uncomfortable in order to support change, responses suggest that district leaders need additional support regarding how to encourage and navigate these conversations. The CR-S Framework identifies topics to discuss such as bias but does not include specific and targeted resources for navigating those conversations in a healthy and productive manner. The feelings shared by participants suggests a need for additional resources and support in this area. Without these resources, conversations about race may tend to shift into other topics that are less emotionally charged for people, resulting in a lack of progress in discussing these inequities (Singleton, 2015). In addition, this finding has implications for the ways in which district leaders are supported who are placed into uncomfortable situations, especially as they are encouraging these conversations as it relates to the implementation of the CR-S Framework. Supporting individuals who are leading these challenging conversations will be imperative in the effectiveness of equity efforts.

### ***Category 2: Professional Development***

All participants discussed professional development as an important step in their implementation efforts regarding the CR-S Framework, especially as it relates to discussing inequities due to race, suggesting that this principle was weighed by district leaders as a top priority. This area, one of the four principles identified in the CR-S Framework, was noted to be an ongoing effort by participants consistent with research about the importance of professional development in promoting equitable practices in schools (Castagno and Hausman, 2017). Participants expressed a wide range of

professional development methods, topics, and presenters. While some described mandatory training on the topic of equity for school leaders and staff, others shared optional workshops and book study groups. Providing opportunities for book studies to build capacity in staff to foster understanding disparities in achievement and reflecting on actions to address these is a tool used by principals (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2019).

Reflections about the need for ongoing professional development suggests the understanding by district leaders that learning about the CR-S Framework and about equity topics in general will be ongoing. However, challenges related to making professional development mandatory and with the need to remind people in their school communities that professional development will be ongoing in this area were evident. Consistent with the first principle of creating welcoming and affirming environments, there is a lack of specific professional development resources available within the CR-S Framework, which participants' responses suggest a need for. Recommending topics to teach within professional development sessions, but not including resources to teach those topics leaves district leaders with the task of ensuring that the individuals who are conducting these sessions are highly skilled in researching and presenting these topics so that there is long-term impact. Khalifa (2018) emphasizes the importance of professional development shifting from only having conversations about equity to ensuring that culturally responsive practices are embedded within the system and are sustaining, a term included in the title of the CR-S Framework.

District leaders differed in their descriptions about who is conducting professional development regarding equity topics, with some district leaders bringing in experts from outside the district and others focused on building capacity from within. District leaders



who discussed the use of outside experts reflected ideas aligned with Khalifa (2018) who asserts that scholars in the field who offer research-based strategies regarding culturally responsive practices support the movement of conversations into sustainable actions. Those who shared ways to build staff capacity to conduct professional development mirrored research by Cumings Mansfield and Jean-Marie (2015) who noted the role of building staff capacity in mitigating inequities. Participant responses also echoed research findings about shifting the power of addressing equity from principals to school staff (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2019). Implications for shared practices on how to build capacity in staff to lead these learning sessions or where to access experts from outside the district are evident.

Participants shared their feelings about principals being uncomfortable and lacking readiness to lead sessions regarding educational equity, especially as it relates to race. These sentiments are reflected by Young et al. (2010) who found that principals recognize challenges in implementing equity and diversity plans and report feeling ineffective and unprepared to address increased diversity in their student populations.

In light of these reflections by district leaders, implications for increasing the comfort level of principals to address race-related issues and to lead conversations about these complex issues are apparent. Principals who are uncomfortable leading professional development sessions on topics including equity and race-related issues will be unable to provide safe environments for staff to feel comfortable reflecting on and discussing these challenging topics. District leaders will need to gain a greater understanding of the reasons why principals are uncomfortable leading this work and

ensure safe spaces for discussion and learning in order to build capacity in leaders to role model culturally responsive practices and direct equity efforts within their schools.

### ***Category 3: The Role of Stakeholders***

The important role of stakeholders in advancing the practices and principles outlined in the CR-S Framework were evident in participant responses, including roles of district leaders, school building leaders, teachers, students, and families. District leaders emphasized their commitment to being persistent in their equity efforts. Input from participants reflected many aspects of the social change leadership theoretical framework used as a lens to view this study, including the faith that leaders expressed in the potential of others to contribute to the work required to lead social justice change (Ospina, 2012). This theoretical framework also emphasizes the importance of the relationships between leaders and those involved in social change, and how they are interdependent, resulting in collective actions that occur within a broader system (Ospina & Sorenson, 2006).

District leaders described wanting to both support and empower others to ensure that school staff do not feel alone in their efforts to address equity within their schools, a finding echoed by Castagno & Hausman (2017). Given the optimism and positive outlook of participants regarding the role of stakeholders, it appears that collaborative relationships are seen as essential. However, it is unclear how to engage stakeholders who are resistant to join in efforts to identify and address inequities or who hold different viewpoints regarding the importance of these efforts in educational settings.

Equity committees and teams focused on implementing the principles of the CR-S Framework were described in detail. Although it is clear that these teams are supporting

equity efforts, the range of areas of focus and the lack of information regarding their impact suggests a need for clear roles and outcomes identified for these teams. Khalifa (2018) recommends that equity teams lead professional development, collect and analyze equity-related data, and become involved in ensuring culturally-relevant curriculum. In order for true change to occur within school districts, power needs to move from leaders to stakeholders, an important shift in power emphasized by Khalifa (2018).

Regarding families, participants shared a range of ways that family engagement is fostered including climate surveys, forums, and serving on committees. Perceptions of school climate are important in implementing the CR-S Framework to mitigate racial inequities, as Black students report lower positive school climate than White students (Parris et al., 2018). Student voice was also discussed by several participants, along with efforts to provide safe spaces and ensure representation of students on committees. Empowering students through multiple methods and supporting them to become “empowering agents of positive social change” is identified within the CR-Framework (NYSED, 2019, p. 8) as an important area for our education systems to foster.

Despite the discussions about student voice, minimal information was shared about the power of student voice in contributing to specific changes in policies or practices, as these discussions largely focused on including students on committees or providing spaces for them to talk about challenging topics in the area of equity. Although these are important steps, responses suggest a need to increase student opportunities to provide input in important decision-making including areas that directly impact students’ daily school experiences such as access and opportunities in academic areas and discipline practices.

#### ***Category 4: Disproportionality***

Participants were forthcoming in their reflections regarding gaps in achievement and discipline practices for Black students compared to White students in their school districts, sharing efforts expended for an extended period of time to closing this gap. The achievement gaps described are consistent with those evident in the literature, as the achievement gap between Black and White students has been demonstrated across grade levels in schools (Brown, 2010; Hung et al., 2020; Stevens et al., 2018). Efforts to reduce the achievement gap through a range of interventions have not yielded significant results (Jeynes, 2015), consistent with what participants reported about long-term efforts that have not closed achievement gaps within their districts.

As culturally responsive teaching practices are considered a powerful way to close the achievement gap (Hammond, 2015), many participants highlighted the ways in which the CR-S Framework is guiding these discussions and practices. Disproportionality in achievement and advanced placement classes were areas in which two principles from the CR-S Framework, High Expectations/Rigorous Instruction and Inclusive Curriculum/Assessment, were discussed (NYSED, 2019). Several participants shared using the framework to guide processes for reviewing curriculum materials and textbooks to ensure that materials are culturally responsive and reflective of the diversity in their student populations. These responses are echoed in the literature about specific practices used to mitigate inequities including ensuring that curriculum includes the cultures and histories of students (Blaisdell, 2016).

Participants expressed frustration and concern about their district's achievement gaps, with responses reflecting an ethic of care which has been identified as a key trait in

district leaders when addressing the achievement gap (Stansberry Beard, 2012). As the achievement gap between White and Black students has been documented extensively, it is not surprising that this was referenced by participants. However, other than discussing how they are including more culturally inclusive curriculum materials, minimal information was shared about ways that the CR-S Framework is being used to close achievement gaps, suggesting a gap in the framework that may be considered for expansion to support school districts.

Additionally, the racial discipline gap between Black and White students has been a consistent finding in the literature (NYSED, n.d.) and was consistent with information provided by participants regarding practices within their school districts that result in Black students being suspended more than White students. Changing mindsets and building relationships with students were noted to be essential, consistent with research about the role that bias may play in harsher discipline practices for Black students (Liang et al., 2020). The positive impacts that result from getting to know students, which was emphasized by participants, echoes Emdin (2016) who notes the positive changes in the power structure that occur when teachers and students build relationships and connections.

Restorative practices were highlighted as increasing in use to address disproportionality in suspensions. This finding is in alignment with Stutzman Amstutz and Mullet (2015) who assert that restorative discipline and relationship-building are essential in creating safe environments that lower suspensions and raise achievement in students. The relationship between how behavior is addressed and the impact on

achievement was discussed, a concept explored by Brown (2018) when describing the significant impact of restorative practices on achievement, attendance, and behavior.

Conversations about why students may have engaged in behaviors and how to learn more about ways to support them is paramount. It was noted that while the CR-S Framework may not have been the reason some participants began initially using restorative practices, their responses reflected the understanding that their efforts to address the higher suspension rate of Black students are connected to recommendations embedded within the CR-S Framework.

The importance of relationships was discussed in depth when reflecting on inequities, with the idea of changing mindsets noted to be essential. Khalifa (2018) suggests many strategies to minimize exclusionary practices such as suspensions. While the code of conduct was discussed as one way in which districts are reviewing policies, other policies directly related to achievement gaps, grade retention, discipline, and other areas that disproportionately impact Black students were not shared. It may be that these policy revisions have occurred and were not discussed in the context of the current study, but the information obtained suggests a need to further explore whether current policies may be supporting the continuation of inequities within schools.

Additionally, although race was directly addressed when discussing achievement gaps and disproportionality in discipline, an unanticipated finding is that participants did not directly address the topic of race/ethnicity as extensively as anticipated, although the research questions were focused specifically on the use of the CR-S Framework in mitigating inequities between White and Black student populations. The CR-S

Framework is intended to provide strategies to mitigate inequities in many areas, including those due to race/ethnicity.

Given the current climate and national events highlighting systemic inequities that continue to negatively impact Black individuals, it was anticipated that the use of the framework to guide the mitigation of inequities due to race/ethnicity would be discussed more in depth. This has an implication for further opportunities and training for district leaders to delve more into the ways that the CR-S Framework can guide their equity efforts when disproportionality exists and racial inequities are apparent between groups of students in their districts. Being open to fully confronting and discussing these injustices is the first step to making a difference, as educational leaders have a great deal of power to speak up about oppression or to reproduce it (Khalifa, 2018). Therefore, it is imperative that districts understand fully their inequities between subgroups of students and develop targeted plans to mitigate these inequities.

## **Focus Area 2: Challenges and Barriers**

### ***Category 5: Familiarity with the CR-S Framework***

The range in communication regarding the CR-S Framework when it was first released was a recurring theme in interviews with participants. District leaders shared their experiences with hearing about the framework through word of mouth and desiring more communication about specific expectations regarding implementation of the CR-S Framework. This has contributed to school districts being at different places in their understanding and implementation of the framework.

Participant responses suggest the need for clear structures in place to provide time and space for staff to become familiar with the main principles and recommendations

within the CR-S Framework. Competing priorities, limitations posed by union contracts, and scheduling all impact the ability to provide time to delve into the CR-S Framework. The understanding that staff engaging in learning about culturally responsive practices is important to increasing teacher dedication to using these practices with students was evident (Bonner et al., 2018).

***Category 6: Uncomfortable Change***

A range of feelings and frustrations about challenges and barriers with the implementation of the CR-S Framework were shared. Responses suggest that in addition to inconsistent communication about the CR-S Framework when it was released, issues presented by staff when introduced to the framework and its principles of equity were the biggest concern. A challenge shared was that of staff members feeling that equity efforts are not necessary if they do not work in a diverse district, as they feel that the CR-S Framework is only needed in districts with high racial/ethnic diversity. Mayfield (2020) directly identifies this issue and highlights important reasons why culture reflects more than skin color and the myriad of reasons why culturally responsive practices are an important practice for society as a whole. These suggestions would be helpful for district leaders working in racially and ethnically homogenous schools to support navigating these arguments made by staff and community members against implementing the CR-S Framework.

Responses by participants highlight two major obstacles that people pose in equity efforts aimed at addressing the principles in the CR-S Framework. These include a lack of acknowledgment about equity issues in their districts and outright resistance to efforts made at advancing equity. A plausible reason for these obstacles is the feeling of



discomfort, a well-documented feeling experienced by people when exploring topics related to race (DiAngelo, 2018; Mayfield, 2020; Oluo, 2018; Singleton, 2015). Terms such as White privilege bring up strong feelings in many individuals, as noted by participants. Staff often become defensive during equity conversations (Mayfield, 2020). The importance of normalizing discomfort when individuals become defensive will be essential for implementing the CR-S Framework.

Chaos theory, which originated in the fields of mathematics and science, offers a lens in which to view these reactions of defensiveness by some individuals. Turbulence and complications that already exist within a current system, such as public education, experience chaos when an agent of change is introduced (Wertheimer & Zinga, 1998). Educational leaders will need to demonstrate courage and be prepared for these reactions and the subsequent upheaval to current systems in place within their school districts. It would serve district leaders well to develop responses to the most common types of defensiveness and resistance from others, a strategy emphasized by Khalifa (2018).

Participants' references about the challenges and barriers they experience provided clarity into why they may be in the early stages of implementation of the CR-S Framework, as the need to change mindsets was shared. Consistent with Brown (2018), who shared that culture in a school district needs to be addressed first before specific strategies can be successful, shifting mindsets was an area of necessary focus for many participants in discussing equity efforts and implementation of the CR-S Framework. Inherent in the successful application of the guidelines in the CR-S Framework is the presence of three distinct mindsets: the belief that understanding and appreciating culture is an important part of education, the belief that students and families have unique assets

and contributions that should be leveraged, and the belief in the importance of self-reflection to understand personal biases and become empowered to mitigate inequities. These mindsets are considered to be critical in the work of implementing the framework (NYSED, 2019).

While district leader descriptions about mindset shifts did not directly identify a growth mindset, participant responses suggest a need for staff to adopt a mindset where they are comfortable engaging in self-reflection, learning about challenging topics, and using their new learning to advocate for change in areas where injustices are present. Fostering growth mindsets, as described by Dweck (2006) encourages people to seek out new challenges and opportunities and thrive on the exciting changes they bring. Fostering growth mindsets regarding mitigating inequities, identifying racial injustices, and working through uncomfortable discussions and realizations can bring about significant changes in individuals, which may lead to changes across systems.

### **Focus Area 3: Approaches and Strategies**

#### ***Category 7: Diversity of Action***

This study validates research suggesting that a range of actions are required to bring about systemic change. Hiring practices were identified as a significant step in ensuring that a diverse staff is represented in order to successfully implement principles identified in the CR-S Framework, echoing a recommendation in the framework to increase recruitment and retention efforts of diverse staff (NYSED, 2019). In addition, hiring individuals from within the community is seen as essential to ensure representation of those with an understanding and commitment to the school community (Khalifa, 2018).

Overall, responses by district leaders reflected their opinions about not making excuses or waiting to make sure that everyone agrees with equity efforts before engaging in actions. Leadership drivers consistent with the social change leadership theoretical framework were evident in responses by participants including values of social justice, understanding the role of power in social change, recognition of systemic inequities, and a vision of the future (Ospina & Foldy, 2010).

Equity policies and goals reflecting the district's commitment to anti-racism were shared as important steps in addressing barriers to mitigating inequities between White and Black students. This aligns with Kendi's (2019) assertion of the impact of racist policies on enabling continued racist beliefs. Some district leaders also indicated their plans to hire an individual to direct equity efforts in their districts in order to ensure a more consistent implementation plan, recognizing the time and efforts these systemic changes will require. Taken together, responses from participants indicate a range of ways in which their districts are planning on continuing to address the principles identified in the CR-S Framework. All participants shared sentiments suggesting the importance of the framework in supporting their continued efforts at advancing equity and their commitment to this endeavor.

### **Limitations**

A qualitative descriptive study provided the opportunity to explore and understand individual district leaders' experiences in implementing the NYSED CR-S Framework. The school district leaders who participated in the study provided valuable information about their experiences and perceptions about engaging in this work. However, the following limitations of this study were identified:

The sample size of six participants is relatively small and was determined through network sampling after school districts met pre-determined criteria. The sample size and willingness of participants to be interviewed through a network connection potentially limits the generalizability of the study results. Since participants volunteered to participate, it is possible that their implementation of the CR-S Framework is different than that of other district leaders who did not choose to participate. However, as this is a qualitative descriptive study, the personal experiences of district leaders are explored with the intent of understanding their experiences with the CR-S Framework as a starting point to identify successes, strategies, and potential challenges with the use of this framework; it is not intended to be generalized to all school district leaders across New York State.

Interviews were conducted virtually through the Zoom platform, which did not allow for face-to-face meetings and rapport building within personal meetings with school district leaders. Although this examiner believes that rapport was quickly established with all six participants, virtual interviews may have impacted the extent to which this rapport was established.

Additionally, the researcher is a school district administrator who is responsible for directing equity and works closely at district office with assistant superintendents and a superintendent who are engaged in mitigating inequities through several strategies including the use of the CR-S Framework. The researcher has developed and conducted professional development workshops about the CR-S Framework and has developed district goals in alignment with the framework, resulting in personal thoughts and opinions about the importance of the CR-S Framework in guiding equity efforts. To

address potential bias, an interview protocol was used with all participants, with no sharing during interviews on the part of the researcher regarding implementation of the CR-S Framework in a professional capacity.

## **Recommendations**

### ***Recommendations for Policy Development***

The results suggest the need for an examination of policies at the state, district, and school levels. At the state level, the CR-S Framework has been developed to support educators with culturally responsive education efforts aimed at mitigating inequities and supporting all students. However, the implementation of this framework is not mandated, and therefore, there are a range of ways in which this framework is being utilized, from likely not at all to having a significant part in guiding equity efforts within districts. The amount of time, expertise, and commitment that went into developing the CR-S Framework is evident, supporting the need to ensure that all school districts are utilizing the strategies embedded within the framework.

Although all participants in the study self-reported that they were implementing the CR-S Framework to some extent within their districts, others may have chosen not to participate because they are not implementing it at all. Although it is evident that mandating this framework would be complex, it is important to note that some participants shared concerns that some aspects of the framework and culturally responsive education in general are not mandated. Without a clear policy about the expectations regarding implementation of this framework, its ability to mitigate inequities systemically within school districts across New York State will be compromised. Just as

school districts have mandated reading instruction and math instruction, among others, so too should culturally responsive teaching and practices be considered a requirement, as targeted social justice efforts should not be a choice. To that end, having districts submit progress reports regarding their use of the framework and data to support efforts should be considered. As educational leaders, there is a moral imperative to address social justice causes and discriminatory policies and practices within our school districts. Strong consideration should be given to considering a policy that would require all school districts to demonstrate their understanding of the principles outlined in the CR-S Framework and the action steps taken to advance equity.

As noted by many district leaders, examination of district policies in an essential component of the CR-S Framework. These may include policies regarding attendance, grading, athletics, discipline, ability to access field trips, enrollment in advanced placement classes, and many additional areas where equity can be further supported. From a social justice lens, policies need to reflect districts' commitment to equity for all students, and a disconnect between policies and practices will make equity efforts extremely challenging. The framework specifically identifies policy review as a recommendation and the responses of district leaders suggests a range of ways in which policies have been examined. Recommendations for ways to share these policy changes with other districts and for NYSED to gather data on this and collaborate on ways to support districts who are resisting changing policies that will mitigate inequities is recommended.

Finally, at the school level, policies should be examined to ensure that they are fair, consistently applied, and equitable to all students. It is important to consider how

policies are applied from school to school within the same district and across districts. Although this study examined district leaders' experiences with the CR-S Framework, just as there were many differences noted across districts, so too will there likely be differences noted between schools even within the same district. Ways to examine and revise policies to support equitable practices and outcomes should be explored. Systemic change cannot occur without an examination and revision of all policies within systems that may be continuing to contribute to inequities.

### ***Recommendations for Improved Practices***

It is imperative that educators and educational leaders have an understanding of the needs of the diverse populations in their schools. This understanding includes knowledge of a range of culturally responsive practices in addition to awareness about factors that may contribute to inequitable practices and outcomes. Issues such as bias, resistance, fears, and difficulty with conversations about challenging topics such as equity and race were shared by participants. These factors can have a significant impact on a district's ability to identify and mitigate inequities.

This study suggests the need for increased and ongoing professional development experiences for educational leaders and the staff and families within their communities in order to positively impact practices. During interviews, district leaders conveyed a strong sense of urgency for engaging in equity efforts and moving the principles of the CR-S Framework forward. However, their experiences are greatly impacted by diverse knowledge, skillsets, and feelings of school and district leaders and staff about the work involved in mitigating inequities. It would serve district leaders well to ensure the provision of a range of ongoing professional opportunities for staff to learn and discuss

culturally responsive teaching strategies, opportunities for collaboration among teachers and colleagues to share ideas, and strategic plans to address gaps in achievement and opportunities among their student populations. These professional development opportunities need to include all members of a school community including office staff, coaches, bus drivers, and cafeteria staff among others, a sentiment echoed by Khalifa (2018) when emphasizing systemic professional development on the topic of equity. A companion manual to the CR-S Framework containing a resource bank of specific professional development workshops, lessons, discussion guides, book study guides, and other supportive material would be valuable for school districts engaging in the implementation of the CR-S Framework.

Practices are also impacted by the abilities and desires of those individuals attending professional development workshops to implement what they have learned in their classrooms and schools. Improving practices will require ongoing opportunities for reflection, discussion, and accountability in ensuring that practices are having a positive impact on students and families. The range of roles of equity teams evident in the study suggests an opportunity for these teams to play a role in creating and facilitating these learning opportunities, in addition to monitoring the effectiveness of practices through examination of data.

Additionally, this study further validates the incredible power of individuals to either support or impede equity efforts within districts, which has been highlighted in numerous books and research studies. The resistance posed by individuals was passionately referenced by participants, with clear examples of verbal comments made that indicate resistance to equity efforts, especially as they relate to Black students.



School districts cannot address what is not first acknowledged, and therefore, it is critical that the tools and support to overcome this resistance are available to district leaders. Because of the challenges involved in equity efforts, it is imperative that school district leaders recognize this tendency of some individuals to resist moving beyond conversations to demonstrating measurable outcomes in closing equity gaps. Accountability and measurable data will play a major role in how successful efforts to advance equity will be.

Finally, this study suggests challenges with ensuring communication about the availability of the CR-S Framework to all school district leaders across New York State. District leaders shared a range of ways in which they learned about the framework, often through colleagues, so it is possible that there are some districts in New York State who may be unaware of the framework and therefore, may not be implementing it at all within their school districts. Consistent implementation cannot occur without consistent and effective communication. Therefore, practices regarding communication about this framework and support in implementation should be examined to consider opportunities for improvement.

### ***Recommendations for Further Research***

This research study is the first of its kind to examine the implementation of the NYSED CR-S Education Framework. It provides a starting point for further exploration into the use of this framework, especially as it relates to mitigating inequities between specific student populations.

Additional studies further examining the use of this framework would provide further insight into the equity efforts in school districts across New York State. It is

possible that the six district leaders who agreed to participate in the study may have shared characteristics such as a greater familiarity with the framework or increased commitment to implementation. Recognizing the small sample size and the range of school districts across New York State, opportunities for further study may include a focus on gaining information from district leaders in a range of districts in urban, suburban, and rural locations. In addition, ensuring that a range of district sizes are included may provide insight into differing challenges and strategies used in smaller districts versus larger districts.

It is important to consider how many school districts are aware of the CR-S Framework and the first steps that districts have taken in implementation. Additionally, information regarding specific actions that districts have found to be effective in mitigating inequities would be valuable information for other district leaders. There are numerous opportunities to explore specific aspects of the implementation and impact of the CR-S Framework and those opportunities are recommended.

Although district leaders offered many ways in which their districts are taking next steps, there was no mention of their steps to address their own well-being as it relates to the impact that this work can have on individuals. Responses suggest an unwavering commitment to continue to advance efforts at addressing equity, with a lack of acknowledgement of the toll that this may take on them as district leaders. An absence of information regarding plans to collaborate with other district leaders, ensuring that they are taking care of themselves, or providing opportunities to recharge was concerning. Although this question was not asked directly, all participants shared the support they intend to provide to all other stakeholder groups including principals,

teachers, students, and parents. This has significant implications for the sustainability of equity efforts, if the need to take care of the leaders of this work is not acknowledged or addressed. Further research exploring the impacts of sustained equity efforts on district leaders would be valuable in understanding and supporting those who are leading this work at an incredibly challenging time in our country of racial injustice and unrest.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the implementation of the NYSED CR-S Education Framework in mitigating inequities in schools, specifically between White and Black student populations. District leaders provided input on their district's implementation efforts, challenges and barriers they experience, and approaches and strategies used to overcome these challenges and barriers. The literature suggests a gap in empirical studies on the implementation of this framework within New York State school districts. The current study provides insight into understanding the range of school district implementation experiences and implications for consideration.

The results of this qualitative descriptive study addressed the following three research questions:

1. As reported by district leaders of public school districts in New York State who self-identify as implementing the New York State Education Department (NYSED) Culturally Responsive-Sustaining (CR-S) Education Framework to some extent, to what degree and in what ways is the framework being implemented to mitigate racial inequities between their Black and White student populations?

2. As reported by district leaders of public school districts in New York State who self-identify as implementing the CR-S Framework to some extent, what barriers and challenges are impacting the implementation of this framework in mitigating racial inequities between their Black and White student populations?
3. As reported by district leaders of public school districts in New York State who self-identify as implementing the CR-S Framework to some extent, what approaches or strategies can be used in order to alleviate barriers and challenges and implement the framework in mitigating racial inequities between their Black and White student populations?

Local and national events regarding racial injustice and subsequent protests and calls to action have been increasing and are receiving considerable attention. The growing number of incidents and the literature about these issues underscores the importance of understanding ways in which racial injustices can be addressed within all systems including public education. Inequities in schools impact the opportunities and academic outcomes of large populations of children based on their race or ethnicity (Rowley & Wright, 2011). The achievement gap between White and Black students has been extensively documented in educational settings (Brown, 2010; Ford & Moore, 2013; Hung et al., 2020; Stevens et al., 2018). Racial inequities contribute to negative school experiences, a greater increase in mental health challenges, and poor long-term health outcomes for Black individuals, highlighting the importance of addressing these inequities early (Brondolo et al., 2011; Carter et al., 2019; Johnson-Ahorlu, 2013; Zapolski et al., 2019).

In 2018, the United States Department of Education approved the New York State Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) focused on promoting educational equity for all students and ensuring accountability in this endeavor (NYSED, n.d.). In response, NYSED began its development of the CR-S Education Framework. This framework, developed by education experts and stakeholder groups, was made available in 2019 as a guide for educators and educational leaders to use in addressing the needs of diverse student populations and mitigating inequities in education systems (NYSED, 2019).

The purpose of this study was to provide insights lacking in the research regarding how district leaders are leading the implementation of the CR-S Education Framework in school districts in New York State to advance equity between their Black and White student populations. A qualitative descriptive study captured the information regarding the participants' experiences with the CR-S Framework. As the CR-S Framework's principles and recommendations guide the work of systemic change within school districts, school district leaders were chosen for the study based on their role in leading systemic change efforts within their districts. Capturing the voices of district leaders regarding implementation, challenges and barriers, and strategies used was intended to support a foundation for understanding initial stages of implementation of this framework.

With this information, school district leaders may increase their capacity to be proactive in ensuring that policies and practices are in place to mitigate racial inequities. Additionally, understanding specific practices that are being utilized to advance equity within public education and the challenges inherent in addressing this complex issue have wide-ranging implications for other organizations. Practices and policies implemented in

school systems can be used as a model for addressing racial inequity, in addition to other inequities, within organizations beyond the public school system.

The theoretical framework of social change leadership (Ospina and Foldy, 2005) was used as a lens to explore the research questions identified in this study. This framework identifies both a worldview anchored in social justice and leadership practices to support strategic action as essential components of social justice change (Ospina et al., 2012).

Participants in the study included six school district leaders in New York State who engaged in semi-structured interviews via virtual conferencing. All participants were identified through network sampling after determining that their districts met three predetermined criteria. An interview protocol was developed and utilized, with each interview transcribed via transcription software. Interviews were recorded and each transcript was carefully read while listening to audio files to ensure accuracy of transcription before coding.

The overall results of the study suggest a wide range in practices regarding the implementation of the CR-S Education Framework, with similarities and differences noted in many specific areas of implementation. The results provide implications for policy development, improved practices, and further research. Of particular note is that while the research questions focused on the mitigation of inequities between Black and White students, some responses did not specifically address this issue. This speaks to the range of inequities that school districts are responsible for addressing.

The overall findings of the study provide essential information about ways in which district leaders are leading change through the use of the CR-S Education

Framework and ways in which they need support to continue this important work. The seven categories identified from participant responses include providing a starting point, professional development, the role of stakeholders, disproportionality, familiarity with the CR-S Framework, uncomfortable change, and diversity of action.

The implications of the findings emphasize a need to support all individuals at every level of leading the implementation of the principles identified in the CR-S Framework including district leaders, building leaders, teachers, parents, students, and committee members. The need to increase capacity across school districts to deliver professional development on equity-related topics and to navigate challenging conversations about inequities, especially as they relate to race, is paramount. These findings highlight the power of individuals to both lead incredible change toward more equitable schools or resist and interfere with these efforts.

Although only six individuals were interviewed, the richness of responses and the passion and commitment of the district leaders who participated in the study suggests that many lessons can be learned about ways to impact change in the area of educational equity within public school districts. The benefits of this study include supporting school district leaders in understanding their shared efforts and experiences in the implementation of the CR-S Education Framework. As leading difficult change can often be an isolating experience, it is important for district leaders to gain insight and be encouraged by the experiences of those leading change in school districts alongside them across New York State.

An additional benefit of the study is the increased understanding of the challenges and barriers experienced in implementing the CR-S Education Framework, especially as

they relate to mitigating inequities between White and Black student populations. As these inequities have been extensively documented for many years in our public education system, it is imperative that we closely examine the reasons for these inequities and barriers that interfering with efforts at mitigating them. Gaining a greater understanding of challenges and barriers will support the identification and provision of additional supports targeted at addressing achievement gaps, disproportionate discipline practices, discriminatory practices, and other ways in which Black students continue to be placed at a disadvantage in schools.

Finally, the most important benefit of this study may be the direct impact on children and youth across New York State. The CR-S Education Framework is the result of a committed effort to engage stakeholders and education experts in providing guiding principles, strategies, and best practices to advance equity in education systems. Its potential to change the lives of students attending schools in New York State is immense. A review of the results of this study provide many opportunities to consider for adding additional resources to the framework that district leaders have indicated would further support their efforts. Armed with the knowledge, passion, and resources to advance equity for their students, district leaders will be in a strong position to make significant strides in supporting the creation of equitable schools across New York State.

In conclusion, the results of the study provide further evidence that addressing the myriad of challenges in mitigating a wide range of inequities is complex, as these inequities have been embedded within systems such as public education for many years. This study highlights the importance of addressing these inequities through a systemic approach that considers all areas within our educational systems that unfairly



disadvantage some students, especially Black students, over others. Isolated efforts have not been successful at changing the school experiences and outcomes of our Black students within our public education system; it is time for a more systemic approach such as the one offered through the use of the NYSED CR-S Education Framework.

The importance of acknowledging and having courageous conversations about these inequities to begin to move forward in impacting change is paramount, as good intentions are not enough for our students and will not impact their futures as actions will. As Singleton (2015) notes, engaging in conversations and listening to others' stories will help with healing and moving forward, as racism will not be eliminated just by good intentions and hard work. Closely examining the ways in which our intentions are translating into impact for our students will be an essential part of advancing equity. This close examination will need to include complex and challenging conversations about topics that are often avoided such as racial justice, discrimination within schools, and the beliefs, unconscious or conscious, held by some individuals that some students do not deserve the same quality education in every aspect as others.

Understanding the ways in which the NYSED CR-S Education Framework is being utilized as a guiding document in the process of advancing equity in schools is essential to making strides in our social justice aims across New York State schools. The importance of continued learning, changing mindsets, overcoming bias, and demonstrating courage in equity efforts cannot be overemphasized, as “we cannot create a new educational system for all with a lack of understanding of what cripples our current system” (Love, 2019, p. 103). This study provides insight into factors that have been crippling our education system for many years. Understanding these factors and being

persistent in our efforts will be essential for advancing equity in all of our schools. Our students cannot wait for our policies, practices, and actions to catch up to our clear understanding about what is right, fair, and equitable for all of our children.

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## Appendix A

### Introduction/Recruitment Email

Dear \_\_\_\_\_ (Superintendent),

I am reaching out to you because it is my understanding that your school district is currently engaged in implementing the New York State Education Department (NYSED) Culturally Responsive-Sustaining (CR-S) Education Framework. As a doctoral candidate in the Executive Leadership (Ed.D.) program at St. John Fisher College, I am conducting research related to this framework. Because of recent local and national events highlighting a long history of systemic inequities for Black individuals, I am very interested in exploring in what ways and to what extent school districts are implementing this framework specifically in mitigating inequities between White and Black student populations. I am also interested in understanding the challenges in implementing this framework in addressing these inequities and the strategies needed to overcome these challenges. Your school district has met the inclusion criteria for this study of having at least 3,000 total students with a minimum of 5-10% Black students in your total enrollment.

The purpose of this letter is to ask for confirmation that your school district is currently implementing the NYSED CR-S Education Framework to some extent and to ask for your assistance by agreeing to participate in this study. You will be asked to participate in one recorded interview with this researcher that will last approximately 40-60 minutes; only audio recording will be saved from this interview, and you can choose whether to turn your camera off during this interview. Your information will be kept

confidential and will not be linked to the results of the study in any way; Names and school districts will not be identified in any transcripts or publication of the research. Your participation is voluntary, and you will be able to withdraw from the interview at any time.

Please contact me to let me know if you are currently implementing the CR-S Education Framework and if you would be willing to participate in this study; please let me know if you have any questions. Questions can also be directed to Dr. C. Michael Robinson, Dissertation Chair, at (XX phone number) or (XX email).

Thank you for your consideration in participating in this research. Your experiences as a school district leader in the work of educational equity is valuable and will contribute to further understanding about how to mitigate inequities for the benefit and success of all students.

Appreciatively,

Diane M. Wynne

(XX phone number)

(XX email)

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Protocol**

**Date/Time of Interview:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Interviewer:** Diane M. Wynne

**Participant Number:** \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Introduction:**

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me.

The purpose of this study is to gain a greater understanding of the ways in which the New York State Education Department (NYSED) Culturally Responsive-Sustaining (CR-S) Education Framework is being implemented in school districts in New York State. Given the current local and national focus on racial injustice, some questions will ask about ways in which this framework is being used to mitigate inequities between White and Black students and any barriers and challenges experienced in implementing this framework. This interview will be recorded to allow me to capture your responses accurately to be transcribed later. The information that you share will be confidential and your name will not appear on any documents related to this study.

Do you have any questions before I begin recording?

#### **Interview Questions:**

Question #1A: Tell me about your professional role and responsibilities.



Question #1B: Tell me about your professional roles and responsibilities as they relate to the New York State Education Department Culturally Responsive-Sustaining (CR-S) Education Framework?

Question #2: Are you aware of any inequities in your district between your White and Black student populations?

Question #3: In what ways, if any, has your district used the CR-S Framework to address these inequities?

Question #4: What challenges or barriers have you or others in your district experienced when utilizing this framework to address inequities between White and Black students?

Question #5: In what ways do you feel your district is ready to address these challenges or barriers to implementation?

Question #6: What additional strategies could your district use now or in the future to overcome these barriers and challenges?

Question #7: Is there any other information about your experience as a district leader engaged in using the CR-S Framework that was not addressed in the above questions that you would like to share?