Districts' Responses to Demographic Change: Making Sense of Race, Class, and Immigration in Political and Organizational Context

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Many U.S. public school systems now face three large demographic shifts: rising poverty, the growing number of students from immigrant families, and increasing populations of students of color. Yet, we know little about how district policymakers react to these important changes or indeed the factors that consistently shape their policymaking. Drawing on interpretative policy analysis, the politics of education, and in-depth interviews with 37 school board members, superintendents, and district administrators across two school districts, I argue that racial meaning emerged as central in both districts' policymaking processes as political and organizational contexts interacted to shape district leaders' meaning-making and policy responses. Yet, leaders' meaning-making and policy responses obscured systematic inequalities in students' lives, including those stemming from race, immigration, and poverty. I conclude with implications of this analysis for understanding school district policymaking and how to improve schooling for students of color, students in poverty, and immigrant students.

Keywords: demographic change, education policy, interpretive policy analysis, race, school district leadership

American society and schools are more diverse and more unequal than ever. Over half of U.S. cities are now majority non-White, and Asian, Black, and Latino populations have migrated to parts of the United States where they have not traditionally lived (Frey, 2011; Singer, 2004). Immigrants, primarily those from Latin America and Asia, are contributing to an increasingly multiethnic and multiracial nation (Frey, 2011; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2002), and children living in immigrant families

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now constitute almost one-quarter of U.S. youth under age 18 (Passel, 2011). At the same time, incomes have declined and poverty has increased across the United States; today, one-third of children live in poverty (Duncan & Murnane, 2011; Frey, 2011). These significant changes come at a time when public schools are under attack, grappling with scarce resources, and experiencing pressure from all directions.

The ways schools respond to these demographic shifts can substantially alter the schooling of millions of children. For example, research suggests that how schools manage shifting enrollment affects the availability of engaging, appropriate, high-quality instruction (Dentler & Hafner, 1997; Wortham, Murillo, & Hamann, 2002); the nature of home-school relations (Lowenhaupt, 2014; Posey-Maddox, 2014); and thus the inclusiveness or exclusiveness of schooling. Nevertheless, like many social organizations, schools often act in ways that are insufficient for meeting these children's needs and building on their potential (Cooper, 2009; Evans, 2007b; Wortham et al., 2002). While scholars suggest that school districts are a crucial lever for improving schooling in systemic and equity-enhancing ways (Cuban, 1984; Elmore & Burney, 1997; Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, 2010; Marsh et al., 2005; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008), we know little about how district policymakers react to these important demographic changes or indeed the factors that consistently shape district leaders' policymaking.

Research on school district organizations highlights district policy as a product of central office administrators' interpretive and persuasive processes (Coburn, Toure, & Yamashita, 2009; Rorrer, 2006; Spillane, 2000) and of organizational and professional factors such as district capacity, leadership, structure, specializations, and reform history (Coburn et al., 2009; Honig, 2009; Marsh, 2002; Spillane, 1998; Supovitz, 2006). This research examines efforts to improve instruction in urban schools but pays little attention to race and class. In contrast, scholarship on urban school politics describes school district policy as resulting largely from the influence of actors external to districts, particularly privileged groups that, in the context of race and class inequality in U.S. cities, constrain equity-oriented district policymaking (C. N. Stone, 1998; Henig, Hula, Orr, & Pedescleaux, 1999; Lipman, 2011; Noguera, 2003; Peterson, 1981; Shipps, 2006; Trujillo, 2013). This literature, while offering insight into racial and class politics, rarely examines district policymakers as key actors.

This study links school district policymaking and urban school politics through an examination of district policymakers' responses to three large demographic shifts facing many public schools: rising poverty, the growing number of students from immigrant families, and increasing populations of students of color. The study reports on data collected in two Wisconsin school districts that have contrasting political and economic contexts. Drawing primarily on in-depth interviews with 37 school board members,

superintendents, and central office administrators, I argue that racial meaning emerged as central in both districts' policymaking processes as political and organizational contexts interacted to shape district leaders' meaning-making and policy responses. In the district with a ''conservative'' community that was unaccepting of immigrants and people of color, district policymakers evoked racial prejudice, used cultural deficit frameworks, and instituted policies that focused on addressing minoritized students' or teachers' ''cultural problems.'' In the more ''liberal'' district, policymakers also evoked racial prejudice and cultural deficit frameworks, as well as models of racial inequality, to pursue policies that altered management practices and extended the provision of schooling. In both districts, policymakers' racial meaning-making and policy responses obscured the roles of systematic inequalities in students' lives, including those stemming from race, immigration, and poverty. Ultimately, these responses were not adequate for ensuring a just and high-quality education for all students. I conclude with implications of this analysis for understanding school district policymaking and how to improve schooling for students of color, students in poverty, and immigrant students.

School Responses to Demographic Change

A small but growing body of literature examines contemporary school responses to racial/ethnic change and increasing poverty and immigration. Some of these studies find schools and communities do little to respond to demographic change (Dentler & Hafner, 1997; Evans, 2007a, 2007b; Wortham et al., 2002), while others have documented schools and school districts altering curriculum and instruction, hiring new staff, and providing professional development to prepare educators to teach a shifting student population (Cooper, 2009; Dentler & Hafner, 1997; Evans, 2007b; Hamann, 2003; Holme, Diem, & Welton, 2014; Lowenhaupt, 2014).

When schools have focused on altering educational services, they have frequently done so without addressing the cultural and political challenges that accompany efforts to respond to new populations. For example, in their study of a suburban Texas school district, Holme et al. (2014) found that district leaders neglected addressing normative and political challenges related to demographic change. District messages about cultural inclusion were inconsistent and sometimes reinforced deficit thinking. At the same time, middle-class White parents successfully resisted reforms that would have reduced racial and socioeconomic segregation.

Indeed, parent and educator resistance frequently undermines policies and programs intended to serve immigrant students (Brunn, 2002; Hamann, 2002; Jones-Correa, 2008) and students of color (Evans, 2007a, 2007b) in demographically changing locales. Educators' interpretations of and commitment to educating ''new'' students in their districts shape their

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schools' responses. Educators often display inclusive or equity-minded intentions toward new student populations (Cooper, 2009; Jones-Correa, 2008; Marrow, 2011), yet their cultural deficit models, "colorblind" perspectives (Cooper, 2009; Evans, 2007a, 2007b; Welton, Diem, & Holme, 2013), and tendency to essentialize and racialize groups (Wortham, Mortimer, & Allard, 2009) undermine these intentions. For example, teachers in areas that are new destinations for Latino immigrants often view these students' language and culture as deficits to overcome rather than as resources to draw from in their schooling or valuable in their own right (Hamann et al., 2002; Wainer, 2006; Wortham et al., 2009). Educators frequently fail to interrogate their own preparedness or the adequacy of school practices (Wainer, 2006; Welton et al., 2013).

These studies suggest the importance of cultural and political factors as they intersect with race and social class in shaping district policymakers' responses to demographic change, but to date, scholars have tended to focus only on single-factor analyses. There has been little attention to the interaction between cultural meaning-making and the politics of demographic change at the district level or to the role of the organizational factors found to be influential in studies of policymaking in the literature on school district organizations. This study takes up these issues.

School District Policymaking as Interpretive and Political

This article draws on concepts from interpretive policy analysis and the politics of education to examine school district responses to rapid demographic change. This approach helps explain policy decisions and their implications by linking district leaders' meaning-making with the organizational, social, economic, and political contexts of their school systems.

Beginning with the insight that "we live in a social world characterized by the possibilities of multiple interpretations" (Yanow, 1997, p. 5), an interpretive approach attends to the multiple meanings of policies and examines policy for the values, beliefs, and feelings that policies express as much as their instrumental rationality. This approach also illuminates policymaking as a social process characterized by ambiguity about the nature of policy problems and appropriate solutions, and thus replete with meaning-making activity (D. Stone, 2002; Rosen, 2009; Yanow, 1996, 1997).

The use of language and symbolism are central to meaning-making. In particular, frames—"specific metaphors, symbolic representations, and cognitive cues" (Zald, 1996, p. 262)—connect with people's existing knowledge, values, and beliefs in ways that simplify, condense, and organize events and make them meaningful. Frames focus attention on some aspects of a situation and direct attention away from others (Benford & Snow, 2000; D. Stone, 2002).

A problem definition is a kind of frame that identifies as problematic certain actors and aspects of a situation. It expresses the nature of the problem, identifies its causes, and assigns responsibility, blame, or praise (D. Stone, 2002; Rochefort & Cobb, 1993). Accepting one problem definition over another privileges certain policy solutions, actors, and social meanings in policymaking (D. Stone, 2002). Actors interact with each other to frame, negotiate, and rearticulate policy problems and solutions, thereby gaining wider support for their position (Benford & Snow, 2000; Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986).

Within organizations, there are likely to be contending interpretations of policy issues that reflect differing interpretive communities or groups that share cognitive, linguistic, and cultural practices that contribute to shared meanings (Yanow, 1997). Studies of school districts reveal that organizational and professional factors shape district policymakers' social interaction, and thus their interpretive communities, in ways that are highly consequential for district decision makers' meaning-making and policy activities (Binder, 2002; Coburn et al., 2009; Spillane, 1998). Yet, these studies largely limit consideration of politics in policy and implementation to the politics of district actors' interpretations and persuasive tactics. Scholarship on the politics of education situates school district policymaking and policymakers within the array of external groups and social, political, and economic forces that constitute the full ecology of district policymaking.

Politics of education scholars emphasize that given the challenging economic circumstances and diverse constituencies in cities, urban school systems require cooperation and resources from nongovernmental groups in order to govern (C. N. Stone, 1993, 1998). School leaders' need for resources typically makes economically advantaged groups (e.g., affluent parents, business elites) more influential than those that lack such advantages (C. N. Stone, 1998; Peterson, 1981).

However, local school systems also need diverse constituencies and respond to popular support (or opposition) to educational efforts (C. N. Stone, 1998; C. N. Stone, Henig, Jones, & Pierannunzi, 2001; Finnigan & Lavner, 2012). District-community relationships are essential: Community members and parents often limit changes—particularly equity-oriented policies—that stray from their values or group interests (Oakes, Welner, Yonezawa, & Allen, 1998). Superintendents tend to work within the bounds of what they perceive to be acceptable norms within the community, and when policy decisions exceed these limits, community members may retaliate against district leaders (Boyd, 1976). Yet, not all community members are treated equally. Those with power (e.g., money, social capital, and legal recourse) have been consistently found to have an outsized effect on policy (C. N. Stone, 1998; Finnigan & Lavner, 2012; Noguera, 2003).

Critical race theory's (CRT) concept of interest convergence suggests that school district policies addressing racial injustice are the result of

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political arrangements in which policymakers, who are typically White and members of advantaged social classes, interpret their own interests as aligned with those of working-class and poor people of color. A guiding premise of CRT is that race is a historical and contemporary system of oppression constituted by cultural understandings and institutionalized structures that reflect and perpetuate racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Derrick Bell (1980), who developed the concept, argues that this convergence of interests explains policymaking that advances racial equality—or appears to do so—in a context of racial oppression.

As in CRT, politics of education approaches conceptualize district policymaking as taking place within a set of relationships that are characterized by unequal resources and power relations; actors operating within broad political, social, and economic contexts; and complex racial interests that only occasionally converge around increasing equity and justice. Thus, district policymaking can be conceptualized as taking place within a "zone of mediation" (Oakes et al., 1998; Renee, Welner, & Oakes, 2009; Welner, 2001), a contested context around a given issue or reform that establishes limits on educational policy and practice. School systems, and the actors within them, mediate these broader social forces (Oakes et al., 1998; Trujillo, 2013; Welner, 2001); however, to date, the theory has not been fully developed to explain the processes by which this occurs.

In bringing together interpretive policy analysis and the politics of education, this article makes three contributions. First, it illuminates the importance of racial meaning to district leaders' policymaking. Second, it provides evidence of both political and organizational influences on district policymaking and interactions between the two. Finally, it highlights school leaders' meaning-making as mediating the impact of broader social forces on school district policy.

Research Design and Methodology

This study draws on data from a comparative case study of policymaking across two demographically changing, medium-sized urban school districts in Wisconsin. I became interested in the Wisconsin schools when, for family reasons, I moved to Wisconsin and began reading newspaper accounts of the demographic changes occurring in school districts across the state. I began site selection by analyzing U.S. census data and data on the enrollment of students who are classified as "limited English proficient" (LEP) to identify three medium-sized (15,000–25,000 students) urban school districts that had sustained increases in their immigrant populations in the 15 years (1994–2009) leading up to the study. From these I purposively sampled (Patton, 1990) for variation in local economic context and political orientation to immigrants and people of color. To determine each city's economic

circumstances, I analyzed unemployment rates, average household income, and poverty rates from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau. To identify attitudes toward immigrant arrival in each city, I searched four local and state newspapers for news articles and commentary on immigrants, immigration, and demographic change from January 2006 to August 2009. I analyzed these for evidence of public and official sentiment and actions toward immigrants and people of color. I searched national lists of local immigration ordinances (e.g., "sanctuary" cities, English-only ordinances), confirming these through local government websites.

The immigrant populations of the two districts selected for study, Lakeside and Fairview (all names are pseudonyms), had increased over the previous decades and primarily included Hmong refugees and Mexican immigrants. Lakeside District is located in a city with a struggling economy and a generally unaccepting attitude toward immigrants and people of color, whereas Fairview District is in a city with a stronger economy and more inclusive attitude toward immigrants and people of color. Both districts have seen striking increases in the percentage of students identified as non-White and as living in poverty.

This analysis draws primarily from semi-structured interviews (Patton, 1990) with 37 current and former school district policymakers from the two districts. As Quinn (2005) notes, "Interviews can provide a density of clues to cultural understandings that is virtually unobtainable in any other way" (p. 7). The participants, interviewed between the spring of 2009 and the spring of 2010, included school board members, superintendents, assistant superintendents, directors of central office divisions (e.g., curriculum, special education, and student services), and community liaisons. I interviewed a total of 20 school district policymakers in Lakeside and 17 in Fairview. I did not ask respondents for their racial identity; however, in the course of interviews, 2 Fairview respondents (12%) identified as persons of color, 5 (29%) identified as White, and 10 (59%) did not self-identify with a racial/ethnic group. In Lakeside, 40% of district policymakers indicated they were White and 60% did not offer a racial/ethnic identification. Given this, and a lack of data on district policymakers' racial identification as a whole, discussion of district policymakers' racial identity is only suggestive. By the nature of their occupations, these participants can be considered middle-class or upper-middle-class. Interviews lasted between 35 and 90 minutes, with a mode of 50 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed with the exception of 2, which were not recorded due to a malfunction with the audio recorder. For these 2 interviews, I relied on handwritten notes I took during the interviews and typed up later that day. To provide background and data triangulation for this analysis, I also drew on over 279 documents, including meeting agendas, school board minutes, newspaper articles, programmatic guides and district reports, and interviews of approximately 50 minutes each with 9 community leaders

and 11 district staff in Lakeside and 8 community leaders and 7 district staff in Fairview.

Data analysis took place concurrently with data collection and continued after data collection was complete. I wrote analytic memos to capture insights and questions and to develop concepts and higher level analysis while sticking close to the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I developed a codebook (MacQueen, McLellan, Kay, & Milstein, 1998) from my conceptual framework and the existing literature and added inductively developed codes through my subsequent analysis using Corbin and Strauss's (2008) method of constant comparison. Then I systematically coded interview and observational data using NVivo 8 qualitative data analysis software. To analyze how participants related demographic change, problems, and policies to each other, I constructed data displays (Miles & Huberman, 1994) of participants' framing of demographic change, problems, and policy responses. Unless otherwise indicated, I identified framings as characteristic of a given district if roughly a quarter or more respondents in each district evoked the framing, but I also paid attention to less frequent responses. I reexamined my matrices to discover patterns in the data, compare within and across districts, and detect missing or disconfirming evidence.

As with all researchers, my identity and positionality shaped the research processes and findings described here. I self-identify as Black and Asian, though my racial identity is often ambiguous to people I meet. The fact that I am a person of color likely influenced participants' responses in interviews, possibly making them more likely to believe I was interested in race when I asked about demographic change. White participants may have responded to my questions in ways they felt showed they were enlightened about race or ethnicity. In talking to an outside researcher interested in responses to demographic change, district leaders also had a stake in constructing themselves as "responding" in a coherent way to demographic changes and constructing others as responsible for inadequate district responses. Black, Hmong, and Latino participants may have felt more comfortable divulging their views to me than to a White interviewer, given the continued control of the districts by Whites, and they may have responded in ways they felt would generate solidarity with me as the interviewer.

In drawing on district leaders' interviews, this study speaks to the predominantly White and middle-class district policymakers' perspectives on how they were responding to demographic changes. The study is limited by what participants were willing to reveal, which in turn was affected by my own identity as a researcher of color from outside the state who was introduced to them as studying their district's and community's responses to immigration or demographic change. Nonetheless, in shedding light on how these district leaders made sense of the changes occurring in their school districts, these particular cases embrace a degree of universality (Erickson, 1986).

Table 1
District Demographic Change, 1998–2009 (%)

	Lakeside		Fairview	
	1998	2009	1998	2009
American Indian	5	5	1	1
Asian	9	8	9	10
Black	2	7	17	24
Hispanic	5	19	5	15
White	79	61	68	50
Free and reduced-price lunch	33[a]	52	27[a]	47
English language learners	10	20	8	17
Hmong-speaking English learners	5	5	2	2
Spanish-speaking English learners	4	14	3	11
Other	1	1	3	4

Note. Figures have been rounded or altered slightly to maintain anonymity.
[a]The state student data system did not provide poverty data for the years in question. Data from the 2000–2001 school year are included in lieu of data for 1998.

The School Districts in Context

Lakeside and Fairview school districts are similar to others throughout the United States in terms of their changing demographics in the midst of the multiple pressures facing urban public schools. Approximately 8% of the population in each of these medium-sized cities (approximately 100,000 total residents in Lakeside and 225,000 in Fairview in 2009) was foreign born in 2009, representing an increase of 15% from 2000 to 2009 in Lakeside and 10% between 2000 and 2009 in Fairview (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, 2009). The increase in students designated as LEP in each district, the majority of whom were Hmong or Spanish speakers, suggest the changes that were taking place: They represented 10% of Lakeside students and 8% of Fairview students in 1998, versus 20% and 17%, respectively, in 2009. As indicated in Table 1, during that same period, students identifying as American Indian, Asian, Black, or Hispanic grew from 21% to 39% in Lakeside and from 33% to almost 50% in Fairview. In both districts, these changes primarily reflected an increase in Latino students, although the percentage of Black students was also growing, and Blacks were the largest non-White group in Fairview. There also was an increase in each city in the percentage of students living in poverty from 2000 to 2009—from an already high 33% to 52% in Lakeside and from 27% to 47% in Fairview.

The policy context of these districts included two state laws of particular relevance to this study: a bilingual education law and an open enrollment law. In 1976, when only a few communities in the state had a sizable

population of Spanish-speaking families, the Wisconsin state legislature passed a bilingual education act that required districts to establish an English language program that used "the native language of the limited-English proficient pupil, instruction in subjects necessary to permit the pupil to progress effectively through the educational system" if a school reached certain thresholds of English learners with a shared native language (Wisconsin Stats. ch. 115 § 95(3)). By 2001, both Lakeside and Fairview had established transitional bilingual education programs for Spanish speakers and English as a second language (ESL) services for English learners (ELs).

The state open enrollment law, which took effect in 1997, allowed students in any Wisconsin school district to transfer to any other school district in the state, regardless of their place of residence. Under this law, districts that lost students also lost state aid, and those that received transfer students received additional state aid (Bezruki, Varana, Gustafson, Lathrup, & Sommerfeld, 2002). In the 2008–2009 school year, Lakeside had a net loss of approximately 450 students through the open enrollment system, which cost the district approximately $2.4 million in revenue, while Fairview had a net loss of approximately 280 students at a cost of approximately $1.5 million. Both districts were also experiencing increased pressure to meet requirements of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act even as state aid to districts was declining by millions each year and had not kept up with costs. While the two cities had similar demographic changes, state policy contexts, and budget pressures, their political and economic contexts differed.

Lakeside

Lakeside was characterized by a conservative political culture and a struggling local economy, and it was an increasingly unwelcoming place for people of color and immigrants. For example, in the 2000s, local government enacted a county ordinance making English the official language and an ordinance barring businesses licensed by the city from hiring undocumented workers. Both ordinances sparked local protest but remained law. In a 2007 newspaper article, the city council president was quoted as saying about the latter ordinance: "It's a message to the illegal alien community that says you are not welcome. Don't come here."[1] District leaders and community members pointed to those laws, the near total lack of people of color holding elected office or positions in the police and fire departments, and the maintenance of a nativity scene on government property as evidence of the city's bigoted and conservative culture.

At the time of the study, Lakeside was experiencing the effects of the consolidation and globalization of local manufacturing and food processing. The estimated median household income from 2005 to 2009 was approximately $43,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009), and the housing crisis and

economic recession that reached its peak in 2008 contributed to a 12% unemployment rate in 2009, compared to 9% nationwide (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011a, 2011b).

Lakeside had yet to achieve academic proficiency for English learners, students of color, and students identified as economically disadvantaged, as measured by state standardized tests given in the 2009–2010 school year (Wisconsin State Department of Education, 2011). Approximately 25% of ELs scored proficient in mathematics, while just over 30% of students identified as economically disadvantaged scored proficient. Achievement scores, disaggregated by racial categories, indicated that about 20% of Black students, 30% of American Indian and Hispanic students, fewer than 40% of Asian students, and about 60% of White students were proficient in mathematics. Scores for all of these groups were substantially lower for reading.

Fairview

Fairview was characterized by a stronger economy and a political culture that vocally espoused "liberal" values of equity and inclusion, though it often failed to enact those values. District leaders in Fairview described their city as "progressive," and local government had enacted separate ordinances that prohibited government employees from asking residents for proof of citizenship and called for equal opportunity in employment, housing, and use of city services regardless of an individual's citizenship status, race, or ethnicity. In 2006, a local newspaper editorial noted "a dramatic increase in the number of minority, immigrant and low-income students requiring extra services" and advocated that in the midst of budget cuts a "high priority" be given to programs for these groups of students. Yet, a 2008 report by a local African American community development organization highlighted racial disparities between African Americans and the broader population in areas of employment, housing, incarceration, education, and health in Fairview County. At about the same time, the local sheriff's office was defending its cooperation with Immigration and Customs Enforcement to identify undocumented immigrants in Fairview.

Fairview had a stronger and more diverse service- and management-oriented economy than Lakeside, with a median household income of approximately $51,000 for 2005–2009 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). In the midst of the economic recession of the late 2000s, the city had a 6% unemployment rate (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011b).

Like Lakeside, Fairview had very low levels of achievement for its ELs, students of color, and students living in poverty (Wisconsin State Department of Education, 2011). Twenty percent of ELs and students identified as economically disadvantaged were deemed proficient in mathematics. Achievement scores, disaggregated by racial categories, indicated that

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about 15% of Black, 20% of Hispanic, 35% of American Indian, 55% of Asian, and 65% of White students were proficient in mathematics. Similar to Lakeside, reading proficiency scores were substantially lower for all groups.

District Response to Demographic Change

Political and organizational contexts interacted to shape district policy-makers' meaning-making and policy responses to demographic changes. District policy responses were particularly shaped by racial meanings attributed by district policymakers to demographic change. For example, the policies that district leaders identified as responses to demographic change were often actually intended to address racial change. In the following, I analyze district policymakers' framing of the problems of demographic change, revealing how they viewed race as particularly problematic, and I demonstrate how organizational and political contexts shaped these racial meanings in each district.

District Policy Response

Fairview and Lakeside district policymakers developed and adopted a plethora of policies—formal and informal rules, programs, practices, and other decisions—to respond to their changing student population (see Table 2). Across the two districts, Lakeside and Fairview district leaders most often mentioned English language programs, professional development on race and culture, strategic planning, behavior and discipline policy, and marketing programs. While district leaders associated English language programs with immigrant student arrival, they emphasized the salience of changes in student race and ethnicity, sometimes intertwined with poverty, in all of the other most common policy responses. In other words, racial meaning was central to these responses.

English Language Programs

Almost half of Fairview and Lakeside district leaders viewed policies related to English language acquisition as a primary district response to demographic change driven by immigrant arrival. One Lakeside assistant superintendent explained,

> When our Hmong students came, what we had to do was we had to figure out how to relate with the families, and how to get them involved with schools, and how to service the kids. So that's when we started our ESL program.

Despite some local opposition, and with support from local advocates in each city, leaders in both districts went beyond what was required by the state bilingual law to promote bilingual education for English learners.

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District administrators and school board members were particularly enthusiastic about two-way immersion, whereby English learners and English-dominant students learn two languages—usually Spanish and English—in the same classroom (Francis, Lesaux, & August, 2006; Thomas & Collier, 2002). For example, the Fairview superintendent said of two-way immersion,

> I think that's a constructive response to the language diversity in the school district. . . . We can have English-speaking kids learn Spanish and Spanish-speaking kids learn English . . . it is, gets down to . . . not think[ing] in traditional ways regarding remedial. We cannot lower the standard for children.

District decision makers' enthusiasm for two-way immersion reflected concern about immigrant students' language skills as well as the opportunities monolingual English speakers might gain from programs that serve English learners. In addition to English language programs, district policymakers cited hiring bilingual staff as a response to immigrant arrival. In both districts, then, district policymakers viewed immigrant students primarily in terms of their linguistic needs and skills and responded to these perceived characteristics.

Outside of immigrant language needs, policymakers in both districts largely emphasized policy responses associated with the shift from a predominantly White to an increasingly non-White student body. District policymakers viewed professional development, strategic planning, marketing, and behavior policies—the next most frequently identified policies—as responses to shifts in the racial identification of the student body.

Professional Development

Seven district administrators in Lakeside and an equal number of administrators in Fairview identified professional development around culturally relevant pedagogy, cultural awareness, and race as a main response to demographic change. As one Lakeside administrator explained, "We've done a lot of diversity awareness sessions, and some trainings, but we need to go deeper. . . . We need to really have our teachers be knowledgeable of different ethnicities and working with kids who are non-middle-class, Caucasian kids." It was not uncommon for district leaders to use ethnicity interchangeably with race and poverty, as this district administrator did (see also Lee, 2008; Omi & Winant, 1994; Pollock, 2004), and the professional development programs were sometimes described as addressing racial inequality, other times as about understanding cultural differences including those believed to exist around poverty, but always related to increasing numbers of students of color.

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Table 2
Policy Responses to Demographic Change, by Number of District Respondents

Policy Responses	Lakeside (n = 20)	Fairview (n = 17)
Curriculum and instruction		
English language programs (ESL, transitional bilingual, dual-language)	11	8
Culturally responsive curriculum and instruction	3	2
Themed schools/programs (International Baccalaureate, fine arts)	3	0
Alignment of the curriculum across schools	0	3
Staff capacity		
Staff professional development to address racial/ethnic difference	7	7
Professional learning communities (teacher collaborations)	4	0
External assistance for district leaders (conferences, partnerships)	3	3
Student intervention and support		
Mentoring and tutoring programs	3	3
Behavior and discipline programs and policy	5	5
Interventions (teams, pre-referral and identification practices)	3	3
Student engagement (relationships, co-curricular activities)	5	0
Management and planning		
Data use (district analyses, studies, advisory reports, site reports)	4	5
Strategic plan/district focus	5	8
Communication		
Marketing (changing public perceptions of the district)	6	4
Presentations to community (speakers program, radio show)	6	2
Staffing		
Hiring and recruiting staff of color	3	4
Hiring and recruiting ESL/bilingual staff	3	1
Diversity liaison position	4	0
Attendance specialist	3	0
Family and community engagement		
Parent engagement program	6	1
Consultation with minority leaders (advisory groups)	4	1
Latino task force	0	3
Creating a welcoming environment	3	0
Provision of schooling		
Starting four-year-old kindergarten programs	1	4
Classroom inclusion (special education, ELL, detracking)	0	4
Resource allocation to schools	0	4
Basic needs and resources for students		
Eliminate fees for courses, co-curriculars, sports equipment	3	1
Food and clothing	3	1

Note. Table includes data for both districts when at least one district had 15% or more of respondents indicate a given policy response.

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Strategic Planning

District policymakers frequently mentioned strategic planning or efforts to focus on reading and mathematics as responses to demographic change. One Fairview district administrator explained, "Probably the biggest document [responding to demographic change] would be the strategic plan that we just passed." Policymakers in both districts associated demographic change with racial inequalities in educational outcomes—that is, with "the achievement gap"—and five Lakeside district policymakers and almost half of Fairview district policymakers identified strategic planning as a way to address that. As an assistant superintendent in Lakeside explained about a strategic plan, "one area of focus was diversity. . . . And, those initiatives focused around three main objectives: the curriculum, what goes on in the classroom relative to instruction, and then the environment in schools." With the arrival of a new superintendent in 2009, Lakeside had changed its strategic focus from this particular plan to a general focus on math and reading, yet Lakeside policymakers understood the goals of both plans as addressing the racial achievement gap.

Marketing

Both districts established explicit policies to "communicate" or "market" the increasing numbers of children of color as helping prepare (White) students for a global future. For example, the Fairview superintendent described the revision of the district mission statement:

> What we're really truly trying to do, while we are open and clear about our challenges, is to also be promoting diversity as a value-added concept . . . to the point where it may serve as a clear positive separator for us and the other districts in [the] county . . . it's that type of message . . . that our children are inheriting from us a world of vast differences. And, by the fact that this district has become more diverse, there's great opportunity for our kids to learn how to deal with differences as they're young.

He viewed these revisions as an effort to promote change in the student population as a positive development that would help prepare students for the future. In Lakeside, central office administrators were working with school principals to produce advertising materials, and school board members initiated an effort to talk to local community groups about how they were responding to changes in the school district, including racial/ethnic change.

Behavior and Discipline Policy

Several district leaders in each city viewed adopting new discipline and behavior strategies as responses to demographic change. These policies

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were meant to address, in part, racial disproportionality in discipline. A Lakeside administrator described the development of alternatives to expulsion by saying "some of those [alternative] programs are all the Black students. That's all they *are* in those programs." One middle-level manager in Lakeside explained that given racial disparities in discipline, the district central office is "educating teachers about alternative responses," which he viewed as "a phenomenal strategy . . . it creates a greater equity. It demands alternative responses, not just 'I don't like you being mouthy, get to the office.'" Though identifying different actors and problems to be addressed, both administrators viewed changes in behavior and discipline policy as responses to racial and ethnic change in the student population.

The logics underlying Fairview and Lakeside policymakers' responses varied in the ways they engaged the concept of race. Lakeside policy responses tended to focus on changing individual and group culture. They favored professional development for teachers, behavior and discipline programs, efforts to make schools more engaging for students and parents of color, and marketing and communication programs. Through these, they sought to shift how teachers and community members thought about and responded to the growth in the numbers of students of color in the district and how students and parents of color interacted with school staff. In contrast to the focus on changing culture in Lakeside, Fairview policymakers largely focused on management strategies. Strategic planning, along with English language programs, was the most frequent policy response Fairview decision makers noted. Ten of 17 Fairview leaders (compared to 7 of 20 Lakeside leaders) viewed management strategies such as strategic planning and/or data use as addressing issues as ways to attend to "achievement gaps" and other racial disparities.

A core of respondents in Lakeside also emphasized a charity response to addressing increasing student poverty. This approach included providing food, winter clothing, school supplies, and health services to individual children who needed them and efforts to eliminate course and extracurricular fees. The Lakeside superintendent said about the growing number of students living in poverty, whom he noted were also the children of color: "We have to feed them, and we have to find clothes for them, and we have to try and find a network that can help them beyond school." Fairview had taken similar measures and was also paying for students' instrument rentals and bus passes; however, only one Fairview leader highlighted these efforts as responses to demographic change. Instead of a charity approach, over half of Fairview respondents emphasized access and inclusion as responses to demographic change. They noted policies that expanded the provision of schooling such as prekindergarten (also called 4K), classroom inclusion of students identified as special education or as ELs, and the equitable allocation of resources across schools. This focus on access and inclusion were intended to address inequalities in access to

quality schooling for students living in poverty, students of color, and students identified as special education or as ELs. Only one Lakeside leader mentioned such policies as responses to demographic change.

While evincing some differences, across the two districts, race and class were central to district policy understandings of and responses to demographic change. These similarities and differences reflected, in part, district leaders' understandings of the problems associated with racial inequality.

Multiple Problem Definitions of Race

The framing of a situation as problematic is central to policymaking because it influences the policies pursued (Coburn et al., 2009; Rochefort & Cobb, 1993; D. Stone, 2002; Yanow, 1996). District leaders framed two overarching problems relative to demographic change: the educational outcomes of "new" student groups and the exit of families from their districts. Policymakers in both districts drew on an amalgam of explanations of these two problems and their relations to race (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Cooper, 2009; Lewis, 2001), and as with their policy responses, they often wove together race and class meanings. These problem frames included the purported cultural deficits of immigrant students, students of color, and students living in poverty; the racial prejudice of teachers and community members; and less frequently frames of racial inequality. In contrast, district policymakers did not view the growth in children identified as English learners as particularly problematic.

The Problem of Achievement

The problem district policymakers emphasized most often relative to demographic change was educational outcomes for children of color, children living in poverty, and English learners. More than half of the district policymakers interviewed in both Lakeside and Fairview expressed concerns about high dropout rates or low achievement levels for their new student groups, often referencing "achievement gaps." These problem definitions drew on racial and class meanings in at least two ways.

First, district policymakers attributed educational outcomes to the shortcomings of their predominantly White, middle-class teaching staff. Offering a teacher-deficit frame, district leaders held teachers responsible for student outcomes and deemed as problematic middle-class White teachers' inability to respond appropriately to students of a different race or ethnicity. Eight Lakeside leaders and five Fairview leaders were concerned about the beliefs and expectations of their district's teachers. Other concerns included inexperience and lack of knowledge about teaching new student populations, failure to reflect students' cultures and languages, and the unwillingness or inability to adjust their instructional practices for new groups of students. These problems were attributed to teachers' racial prejudice or class bias

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or to a cultural mismatch between district teachers and new student populations. A Lakeside administrator explained:

> We have these issues around culturally responsive practices . . . and what the teacher is doing to engage the students so that they want to learn. . . . The tough part of that is that it gets down to belief systems—you can make someone go to training and have them learn how they are different from other people, but [you can't make them think], "How am I going to make this more relevant for those students in my classroom that are different from me?"

District leaders presented teachers' shortcomings as an alternative to a student cultural deficit framing. In Lakeside, the teacher deficit frame provided the rationale for professional development programs to address teachers' beliefs and knowledge about students of color.

District policymakers also attributed unsatisfactory educational outcomes to factors they associated with family poverty, an explanation that sometimes slipped into cultural deficit frames. Pointing to high rates of student mobility and lack of preparedness for school, four Fairview leaders and five Lakeside leaders identified poverty as a source of the district's poor educational outcomes. District policymakers noted that when highly mobile students change schools, they miss or repeat curricular content. A Fairview school board member explained:

> Many of the children who are starting in kindergarten have not had exposure to much structure in their life . . . meaning everything from language . . . to books, to consistent discipline. And so we have kids starting in kindergarten who are really, really needy. And they just can't catch up by the end of kindergarten.

This school board member attributed these issues to the children's home culture, such as language, books owned, and discipline practices. District leaders identified problems of poverty—whether drawing on a cultural deficit framing or not—and called for policies such as four-year-old kindergarten and standardizing district curriculum as a response to those problems.

The Problem of White Middle-Class Exit

Policymakers from both districts identified families, primarily White and middle-class, exiting the district or threatening to do so, as a second major concern related to demographic change. District policymakers already dealing with a fiscal crisis brought on by declining investment in education were particularly worried that the transfer of families to neighboring suburban schools would result in a loss of state funding. Fairview and Lakeside policymakers largely attributed this exit problem to White and/or middle-class parents' racial prejudice or class bias as reflected in their perceptions that district schools were declining with the growing poverty and increasing

numbers of students of color in the districts. As one Lakeside school board member said:

> We have a huge number of families that "choice-out" of our district compared to the ones that "choice-in," and that's been a big concern, and I think a large part of that is due to our changing demographics. . . . [People] look at those numbers [about race/ethnicity and free and reduced-price lunch] and then jump to all sorts of conclusions . . . [that] the academics is [*sic*] sub-par, it's a terrible environment to send your kids to school in. . . . I don't think our community is ready to embrace the diversity that's kind of pouring in, and so that's probably my biggest concern with the rapidly changing demographics.

Using a different language of prejudice, Fairview leaders described some White middle-class families' opposition to district policies as a "zero sum mentality" that viewed attention to new student populations as decreasing school quality and the benefits their own children would realize from the schools. In both districts, then, district policymakers contested the view that the growing racial diversity and poverty in district schools were evidence of school system decline and reframed exit as a problem of families' racial prejudice and class bias.

A few Fairview policymakers also viewed the exit problem as an issue of racial and class inequality, a concern infrequently mentioned in Lakeside. District leaders viewed the ability of Fairview's wealthier parents (of any race) to transfer districts or attend private schools as giving them great influence and undermining policymakers' efforts to improve education for less privileged students in the district. The former superintendent in Fairview explained:

> One of the conflicts you have policy-wise in a district like Fairview that's changing is, how do you balance that? . . . If you make the decision to always come down on the side of social justice . . . and you lose all this tax base [as families exit the district], I don't have any money to affect the social justice issues that I want to. . . . I mean . . . that's kind of the fundamental issue.

This framing of the problem of exit also drew attention to the politics of school funding and state open enrollment policy. In this way, some district leaders attributed exit to race and class inequality.

The Non-Problem of English Learner and Immigrant Education

In contrast to the framing of educational outcomes and exit as problems related to growing poverty and racial change, very few district policymakers described the arrival of immigrant children or students identified as English learners as raising particular problems for school leaders. One Lakeside

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school board member, after describing community sentiment as "if you don't speak English . . . you're a foreigner, you're an outsider" and a Latino/a community living in low-income apartments and working in low-paid food processing, explained the district response to the growth of Latino/a children in the school district: "We follow the current best practices about bilingual education, and I believe we do it pretty well."

In Lakeside, where anti-immigrant and English-only sentiments were prevalent in the community, three school board members did encounter opposition to educating "illegal immigrants" and to bilingual services. However, these district leaders said the opposition did not impede their efforts to meet the educational needs of ELs. For example, one executive administrator in Lakeside described the expansion of a two-way immersion bilingual program: "We just kept doing what we thought was right for kids . . . either ignoring it [the opposition] or just standing up to it."

While they saw the arrival of immigrants and the needs of English learners as fairly unproblematic, policymakers expressed multiple problem definitions that related demographic change to race and to a lesser extent poverty, including cultural deficit explanations, racial prejudice and class bias among teachers and families, and racial and class inequality, all of which contributed to the educational policies district leaders believed were necessary in their districts.

Meaning-Making and Policy Situated in Political and Organizational Contexts

District policymakers' understanding of the challenges of and appropriate responses to demographic change were shaped by the political and organizational contexts in their respective districts. Distinct local political cultures in each district interacted with the advocacy of some community leaders of color and White middle-class parents and with federal and state laws to shape district policymakers' meaning-making and policy responses. However, political context alone provides an incomplete explanation of district leaders' meaning-making. As suggested by prior research (Binder, 2002; Coburn et al., 2009; Spillane, 1998), features of their organizational and professional context also influenced district leaders' meaning-making and their policy responses to demographic change.

The districts varied in terms of their acceptance of immigration and adherence to White middle-class norms. Lakeside community members and district leaders described their city as conservative and intolerant of immigration and racial/ethnic difference, and district policymakers viewed the political culture in terms of cultural difference and racial bias. A Lakeside school board member explained, "Lakeside is a very . . . very conservative community. . . . I appreciate the diversity . . . but it's . . . a harder sell for some parts of the community." In contrast, Fairview community

members and district policymakers viewed their city as liberal and as being, or wanting to be, tolerant and inclusive. As one district administrator explained, "This community prides itself in being very liberal, very progressive." Yet, she continued, "but I always call it the pseudo liberal town because it's the minute that people perceive that zero sum game. It's like if we're giving all these resources to Black, poor, Latino kids then somehow their kids are losing." Like this respondent, some district leaders also described Fairview as failing to live up to these ideals and characterized the political culture in terms of in/equality rather than bias.

Community Leaders of Color

In both districts, Latino and African American community leaders pressured district policymakers to be more responsive to African American and Latino students, particularly through school curriculum. These groups' problem definitions resonated with Fairview and Lakeside district policymakers as legitimate matters requiring a response. In Lakeside, two Black community leaders advocated for a culturally responsive and multicultural curriculum to address the problem of academic achievement for Black students in particular and growing racial and ethnic diversity more broadly. District administrators described updating district curriculum as a result of these community leaders' efforts. A Lakeside administrator recalled:

> There's one African American in the community that was saying the traditional curriculum is very much lacking in acknowledging people of color who have been scientists and doctors. And these kids need to see models that look like them. . . . It only takes one or two people, very passionate about something, to shake things up and say, "You need to look at this."

This administrator commented further that she saw it as her challenge to ensure that multiple perspectives were represented in the curriculum and described the implementation of a review process to ensure greater representation of people of color in the district curriculum.

In Fairview, Latino and African American community members' problem definitions and policy solutions also shaped district leaders' meaning-making. Latino and African American school board members and community leaders advocated for resources and representation in addition to curricular change. These individuals and their organizations pressured district administrators to address concerns including the achievement gap, bilingual education, translation services, parent-school relations, hiring bilingual staff and staff of color, and culturally responsive curriculum and practices. And, several Fairview administrators described the pressures from these groups as legitimate challenges to the district. One executive administrator explained,

> I would say mid-'90s, mid- to late '90s . . . [African American and Latino] community groups, were very, very negative, and very accusatory. It was kind of like, "You're just not doing right by our kids." . . . I think it was a reasonable response, but it was very "shame on you."

Another Fairview administrator discussed political pressure from Latino-serving organizations in the city, which she called community partners: "I think that's good because it's kind of checks and balances . . . this population is growing and it's putting pressure on us to be responsive."

As suggested by the principle of interest convergence, political pressure from communities of color pressed some district policymakers to interpret as important some of the racial remedies that people of color promoted. While Black leaders in Lakeside advocated for a multicultural curriculum and the more politically organized Fairview groups pursued a number of issues, in both districts these groups' claims resonated with district leaders, who responded with some programs, such as adopting a more multicultural curriculum. Yet, CRT and the interest convergence principle also suggest that such responsiveness only comes about because it does not ultimately threaten race and class inequality.

White and Middle-Class or Affluent Parents

The advocacy of predominantly White and middle-class or affluent parents also influenced district policymakers' meaning-making and policy responses to demographic change; however, this influence was less straightforward. While some parents in each district argued that district responses to demographic change were lowering the quality of the schools, district leaders dismissed these claims as a reflection of racial prejudice or class bias. These parents' frames about school quality were not persuasive with district leaders. At the same time, with ongoing budget cuts to public schools, increasing numbers of their students enrolling in neighboring districts, and the loss of state aid when students transferred to other districts, White middle-class parents' framing of "White flight" resonated with district school board members and administrators who were concerned with the fiscal costs of exit. As Hirschman (1970) argues, parent exit and resulting revenue loss spark efforts by district policymakers to abandon policy changes these parents strongly oppose and to promote policy these parents favor.

Seeking to minimize exit, Fairview and Lakeside leaders established policies to respond to concerns of some middle-class White families. In both districts, leaders pursued marketing and instructional policies—such as two-way bilingual immersion and International Baccalaureate programs—that they believed would be attractive to these families and that presented their districts as "positively" diverse. As one school board member in Lakeside explained, "We don't really sell our district the way we

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should . . . so yeah, we need to market that diversity.'' Lakeside and Fairview policymakers' enthusiasm for two-way bilingual immersion was a classic example of interest convergence (Bell, 1980; see also Palmer, 2010). While these programs benefited Spanish-speaking immigrant students, they were particularly popular with some district leaders and middle-class families as a ''world language'' option for their children. In Fairview, where the local political context was often described as liberal and inclusive and there was significant demand from predominantly White monolingual English speakers, there was extensive growth of two-way bilingual programs over time. District policymakers implemented policies benefiting students of color, students living in poverty, and immigrants when White middle-class families and policymakers also viewed these policies as serving their own interests.

Federal and State Laws

Federal and state laws influenced district leaders' policy responses and racial meaning-making in a number of ways. First, the categories embedded in federal and state administrative law, policy, and practice helped constitute the meaning of demographic change. For example, one Lakeside central office administrator described demographic change by reading aloud enrollment statistics for ''homeless'' students, ''English language learners,'' and ''minorities'' that the district compiled to comply with state and federal reporting mandates. At the same time, both districts interpreted the U.S. Supreme Court's 1982 ruling in *Plyler v. Doe* as prohibiting the collection of data about students' immigration status. Thus, district leaders mostly described demographic change in terms of ''English learners'' rather than ''immigrants'' and routinely described their responses to demographic change in terms of race/ethnicity, English proficiency, and poverty.

Second, state and federal laws, and the policies to facilitate those, shaped district policymakers' views of the problems associated with demographic change and the appropriate responses to those. For example, *Plyler v. Doe* and Wisconsin's bilingual education act helped establish district policymakers' expectations for how they should respond to the growth of immigrant and EL student populations.[2] These laws set expectations for allowing immigrant children into school and creating ESL or bilingual education programs. Many Lakeside and Fairview district administrators described the bilingual education law as central to their decisions about how to improve English learner programs. Other state and federal laws that shaped district leaders' understanding of the problems and policy responses to demographic change included No Child Left Behind and state policy on disproportionate identification of students for special education.

Finally, by setting legal mandates for educating immigrant students and students identified as English learners, state and federal laws appeared to expand the interpretive and political space, or the ''zone of mediation''

(Welner, 2001), for negotiating policy in each district. District policymakers drew on the laws to counter local resistance to educating immigrant students and to ensure bilingual language instruction for English learners. Lakeside school board members and administrators used the law to justify their policy responses. One board member explained that in response to community members who ask, "Why do we have to educate the people that can't speak English?," school board members answered that, "these are federal laws, and it's the right thing to do." This board member added, "So I don't think that that [opposition] really influences our decisions."

In Fairview, district administrators described welcoming a state report that was highly critical of the district's compliance with the state bilingual education law because it provided them justification to make changes that were unpopular with teachers of ESL. As one former executive administrator explained:

> As an administration, we were supportive of the audit, okay, because when you're trying to make change in something . . . as dug in as our ESL program was . . . it's difficult to do unless you have some demonstration of need.

State and federal laws helped mitigate teacher and community resistance, making way for schools to respond to immigrant and EL populations.

The example of language policy demonstrates how state and federal laws contributed to district leaders' focus on English learners as well as to categories of race/ethnicity and poverty; shaped their views that some responses, such as language programs, were appropriate policy responses; and mediated teacher and community resistance to policy change. These all contributed to a view that responding to the arrival of immigrant students or English language learners was not particularly problematic in their cities.

Organizational Affiliations and Professional Roles

In each district, policymakers' racial meanings were linked to their organizational and professional contexts. Consistent with previous scholarship on district decision making (Coburn et al., 2009; Spillane, 1998), these roles and organizational affiliations facilitated district leaders' interactions with some political, organizational, and professional actors, yet they made it less likely that district leaders would interact with other actors, which contributed to differences in meaning-making within school districts.

District administrators, particularly those responsible for curriculum and instruction, were most likely to interpret teacher beliefs and practices as problems and to focus on professional development as a response to demographic changes. Few school board members and superintendents viewed teachers as problematic. Those who did, however, provided additional evidence of the influence professional affiliations had on district policymakers' racial meanings. In Lakeside, district school board members who explicitly

raised concerns about teacher beliefs, knowledge, and practices described these concerns as arising from relationships and interactions beyond traditional school board functions and affiliations. As one board member explained:

> A number of us went to [conferences of a national equity-oriented reform group] to really learn about how you can improve student achievement. . . . You have to have teachers who are willing to examine their teaching practice and commit to making changes in their own practice. . . . In my opinion, that's really where the change has to take place. . . . Teachers who . . . in their mind say, "Well, you know, I'm gonna focus on these kids because this child's parents don't wanna help them," you just can't have that kind of attitude.

In contrast, school board members and district superintendents understood White family exit, budget cuts, lack of resources, and poverty as central problems. School board members—who were responsible for district finances and engaging with the public—were the people most concerned with exit and establishing policies to address it. A majority of school board members in each district described family exit as a central problem. Middle-level district managers, who had few interactions with families and community groups as part of their jobs, infrequently mentioned concerns with exit.

Finally, the meaning-making and policy responses of EL and special education program administrators reflected the influence of professional and organizational roles, particularly these actors' responsibility to comply with state and federal law. In both districts, the EL and special education program administrators identified a lack of inclusion in mainstream classes—a central theme in the training of special education and English learner education professionals—as a problem of demographic change. Furthermore, special education professionals in both districts focused on disproportionality—the over- or under-identification of a group of students relative to their representation in the general student population—as a problem of demographic change and a target of policy. This concern reflected special educational administrators' responsibility for addressing state and federal laws about disproportionate identification and placement of students of color and students living in poverty into special education.

When political pressures related to these state and federal laws were present, a wider range of district leaders identified these issues as problematic. For example, in Lakeside, where the state had identified the district as excessively disproportional and was monitoring their efforts to address disproportionality, three administrators outside of the special education office also viewed disproportionality as a concern; but in Fairview, only special education professionals raised this concern.

These findings highlight the complex and varied terrain on which negotiations over racial meaning and policy responses to demographic change

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took place. Organizational and political contexts, and interaction between these, contributed considerably to district leaders' racial meaning-making and policy responses. Close examination of the political context reveals how racial meanings varied between Lakeside and Fairview. Nevertheless, organizational factors also played a role in shaping district leaders' meaning-making and contributed to variation within districts and similarities across districts. Moreover, organizational roles and professional affiliations brought district administrators and school board members into interaction with—or distanced them from—state and federal law, teachers, parents, and community leaders.

Discussion

Shaped by the organizational and political contexts in which they worked, Lakeside and Fairview district leaders' meaning-making reflected a complex orientation to racial inequality and contradictory policy responses to demographic change. School board members and administrators articulated commitments to serving students of color, immigrant students, and students living in poverty; recognized some shortcomings of the schools in meeting the needs of these children; ushered in promising policies like bilingual education; and sought to provide children with basic social needs like food, clothing, and health care. Yet, across both districts, the frameworks that district policymakers used to explain educational inequality centered on individual and cultural explanations of inequality. District policymakers' racial sense-making was largely colorblind (Bonilla-Silva, 2003) and color-mute (Pollock, 2004). That is, it recognized racial categories without acknowledging racial inequality. In addition, these discourses obscured poverty and barriers to immigrant inclusion in many students' everyday lives. Drawing on educational research and my interviews, I argue that discourses of cultural deficits and prejudice on the one hand and diversity and language on the other hand are ultimately limited in their ability to make schools designed to serve White, middle-class, non-immigrant children (Lareau, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999) into schools that are high quality and socially just for all students and suggest an alternative framing and policies.

Individualized Explanations and Remedies for Inequality

The cultural deficit discourse—an explanation of educational and social inequality that attributes school success or failure to individual children, families, or group cultural characteristics (Gorski, 2008; Valencia, 1997)—was woven throughout district leaders' meaning-making about demographic change. In an example from the aforementioned findings, a Fairview school board member explained that children who "have not had exposure to much structure in their life . . . meaning everything from language . . . to books, to consistent discipline" and therefore "just can't catch up by the

end of kindergarten, so they end up being identified in Special Education.''
This framing obscures structural and institutional explanations of educa-
tional inequality such as the apparent misidentification of children of color
for special education that this school board member described, the privileg-
ing of White middle-class behaviors and childrearing habits in schools
(Lareau, 2000), and a lack of jobs that pay a living wage (Anyon, 2005).

In both districts, leaders also framed racial inequality as a consequence
of the individual prejudice of White middle-class parents, community mem-
bers, and district teachers. They advocated teacher professional develop-
ment and marketing district diversity to address these prejudices. As with
a focus on cultural deficits, a discourse of individual prejudice acknowledges
race while simultaneously obscuring the reality of systemic racial inequality
and its material consequences (Leonardo, 2007; Lewis, 2001). District leaders
decried individual prejudice but infrequently questioned school open enroll-
ment laws and patterns of job growth in the suburbs that facilitated, and
likely exacerbated, school segregation and White middle-class exit from
urban schools. Additionally, the focus on prejudice as a problem ''of other,
'bad Whites''' (Lewis, 2001, p. 793) can keep school leaders from considering
their own racism or complicity in systemic racism (Cooper, 2009; Lewis,
2001). Lakeside and Fairview district administrators rarely acknowledged
the possibility of their own racism or considered the district role in perpet-
uating racial inequality. Somewhat ironically then, a prejudice discourse
can also enable the reproduction of racial inequality.

The diversity discourse, also evoked in both districts, positions students'
cultures as an asset in schooling and promotes a view of demographic
change as a positive and enriching development. With some prodding,
Fairview and Lakeside policymakers adopted multicultural curriculum mate-
rials and established instructional programs—such as two-way bilingual
immersion and the International Baccalaureate program—that explicitly val-
ued bilingualism and multicultural knowledge. With fewer than 12% of
English learners in the United States receiving instruction in the language
they know best (Gándara, 2013), Fairview and Lakeside bilingual education
programs were likely serving English learners better than most districts
nationwide. Yet, the diversity discourse and focus on language was no
less problematic than the other discourses.

The diversity discourse substitutes a celebration of the culture, language,
and ethnicity of children of color for attention to race and inequality (Berrey,
2005; Moses & Chang, 2006; Randolph, 2013; Swartz, 2009). As a solution to
White middle-class exit, the effort to market district diversity promoted
immigrant culture and ethnic mixing rather than remedying racial inequality.
With attention on language proficiency, district leaders failed to recognize
aspects of immigrant experience that go ''beyond bilingualism''
(Gershberg, Danenberg, & Sánchez, 2004; Valdés, 1997). They rarely men-
tioned the impact of poverty, immigrant families' legal status (Abrego, 2006;

Mangual-Figueroa, 2013), and social marginalization (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2002) on immigrant children's educational opportunities. Far more insidiously, the almost singular focus on immigrant children's language abilities reduces children to just one aspect of their whole selves, erasing from view their cultures, social practices, and political experiences in a subtractive process (Valenzuela, 1999). The focus on language may effectively enable a particularly facile celebration of diversity by zeroing in on linguistic ability while burying aspects of children's lives that are difficult to disassociate from race and class inequality. The deficit discourse may remain firmly in place, and the prejudice discourse may continue as a convenient diversion.

Finally, the diversity discourse reinforces status hierarchies between groups by shifting attention away from addressing the educational needs of students of color to meeting the needs of White and English-dominant families (Randolph, 2013). The promotion of two-way immersion programs because they were popular with and attracted middle-class White students to Fairview and Lakeside schools potentially undermined the role that such programs can play in reshaping cultural and linguistic values in schools by conveying messages that monolingual White children are more valued than others (cf. Palmer, 2010; Urciuoli, 1996; Valdés, 1997).

Opportunity Gaps and Policies for Greater Equity

Scholars have begun advocating an "opportunity gaps" frame to displace colorblind and individualized discourses that obscure underlying explanations of educational inequality. As Welner and Carter (2013) explain: "The 'opportunity gap' frame . . . shifts our attention from outcomes to inputs—to the deficiencies in the foundational components of societies, schools, and communities that produce significant differences in educational—and ultimately socioeconomic—outcomes" (p. 3). Rather than blaming individuals or groups of children and teachers for failing to achieve, attention to opportunity gaps asks us to consider what opportunities society and schools have provided, or failed to provide, for students.

The opportunity gap concept usefully reframes the achievement gap as a symptom of the "educational debt" (Ladson-Billings, 2006) incurred by a racial social system (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2006). This framing may also be used to highlight systemic inequalities related to poverty and immigration that affect students' educational opportunities. In addition, I would suggest that opportunity gaps can be conceptualized in terms of three dimensions of inequality: inequality in the material conditions of children's lives, denial of cultural belonging or equal social status, and inequitable voice in decisions that affect one's well-being (Fraser, 1997, 2000, 2005).

With this framework in mind, district policymakers might beneficially pursue policies that invest resources in students, schooling, and social equality; recognize and institutionalize equal status for the particular groups of

children and families in their districts; and promote equitable relationships between families and schools so that all families have meaningful participation in district decisions about their children's schooling. Specific policies could equalize funding and untrack classes across district schools or promote living wage campaigns and advocate immigration reform that prioritizes child welfare. They might send district leaders to churches, grocery stores, work sites, and community organizations to learn about families traditionally marginalized from schools and act on what they learn from these visits. Or, they could pursue other avenues that carefully respond to the particular strengths and shortcomings of their programs and the particular needs and assets of their students. There is no magic bullet.

Addressing educational inequality, as the district leaders in this study hoped to do, is a challenge that is deep and wide and shaped by forces outside of schools at least as much as inside of them (Anyon, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Rothstein, 2004). Education is a site where changing meanings and practices may be most possible, but as this discussion suggests, changes in broader society are also necessary. Meeting the substantial challenges involved in building schools and establishing broader conditions for fostering student flourishing will require district policy and practice that explicitly names injustice and then advocates and pursues school and social transformation.

Conclusion

As a growing number of school systems are being challenged to provide more equitable and just schooling for students of color, students living in poverty, and immigrant students, it is crucial that we understand the forces shaping school districts' responses to increasing diversity. This study reveals the centrality and pervasiveness of racial meaning-making in district leaders' responses to demographic change and the role of political and organizational contexts in shaping these meanings in each district. In light of these findings, this study makes three contributions to our understanding of district policymaking and district leaders' policy responses to demographic change. Each contribution has important implications for efforts to improve the quality and equality of schools.

First, in bringing together interpretive policy analysis and the politics of education, this study demonstrates the centrality of race in district decision makers' policy interpretation and meaning-making. To date, research on district leaders' meaning-making has largely focused on that of an instructional or technical nature. Despite many researchers' motivation to improve the quality of schools predominantly serving students of color, this work has not closely examined race in central administrators' policy activity. At the same time, research on the politics of education has acknowledged the importance of race to school reform efforts but has infrequently examined

district leaders' meaning-making, particularly in the current context of shifting school demographics. This study provides evidence that racial meanings were central to district policymakers' interpretation of their circumstances, problem definitions, and policy responses to demographic change. These racial meanings made certain policies, such as teachers' professional development and marketing district diversity, seem like logical responses to demographic change. This study also points to the complexity and multiplicity of racial meanings present in policy activity at a given time, suggesting that while these meanings are important to district policymaking, their influence on district policymaking cannot be assumed.

This finding has implications for efforts to reform school district policy. Critical awareness of racial meanings and their implications may allow district policymakers and advocates for immigrant children, children of color, English learners, and children living in poverty to work more intentionally to develop meaningful policy change. This will require avoiding the pitfalls of cultural deficit, prejudice, and diversity discourses and recognizing the importance and limitations of policies focused on racial change to address the multiple factors shaping students' schooling experiences and lives.

This study also bridges explanations of policymaking that focus on politics and those that highlight organizational dynamics. Research on school districts has illuminated the importance of organizational context in school district policy but has paid little attention to the broader political context of district policy, particularly the influence of community actors (Marsh, 2002; Trujillo, 2013). At the same time, scholarship on the politics of education has tended to ignore organizational context (Bidwell, 1992), treating school districts and the people working within them as homogenous. This study provides evidence of the influence community politics and state and federal laws have on each district's leaders' racial meanings and how organizational roles and professional affiliations mattered to the meanings that were mobilized within the districts. District policymaking took place within a complex context shaped by pressures from parents and community members, political processes like interest convergence, state and federal law, and district leaders' meaning-making. A more complete explanation of district policymaking accounts for all these factors, and their interactions, on school district policymaking.

In practical terms, this implies that achieving better and more just schools requires altering the political and organizational contexts of school districts. Professional affiliations and programs that reach into the district central office and connect with superintendents, EL directors, special education coordinators, evaluation officers, community liaisons, and the like may influence the racial meanings taken up in different parts of the school district organization. Initiatives that bring together actors from disparate areas of the central office, along with school site staff responsible for implementing many policies, and community members invested in improving the lives of immigrant students, children of color, and children living in poverty may

have a better chance of developing widespread racial meanings that promote open, inclusive, and equitable orientations to new student populations. A shifting political context is more difficult and likely will require the organization and political action of local residents who value and are willing and able to struggle for greater openness, inclusion, and equity in their communities, as district leaders alone are unlikely to shift a community's or district's political culture or inequalities.

Third, in illuminating district leaders' meaning-making in relation to political and organizational context, this study contributes to emerging scholarship on school systems as institutions working within a zone of mediation. While this study primarily emphasizes how political and organizational factors shaped district leaders' meaning-making, it also demonstrates that this meaning-making does not straightforwardly mimic that of political forces and that district leaders sometimes resist external actors' meanings. These findings extend the work on school systems as mediating institutions by providing evidence that district leaders' meaning-making may reproduce and/or challenge social, economic, and political forces. Thus, district leaders' meaning-making is part of the process by which school systems mediate the impact of these forces on schools.

This has implications for families and advocates of high-quality and more just schools and lives for children of color, children living in poverty, and immigrant children. District leaders' meaning-making and policy responses to demographic change suggest that many see the need for change to their school systems, even when they work in cities that are not accepting of immigrants, people of color, or people living in poverty. Furthermore, even if some district policymakers are unwilling to change, there are other actors within school districts who may be more willing collaborators in educational change.

Given the challenges of transforming our schools, families and children's advocates may do well to keep this in mind, as meaningful collaboration between district leaders, communities, families, and other advocates is at once necessary, difficult, and possible. Understanding district policymaking and the roles of racial meaning and organizational and political context in shaping district policy is one step toward addressing the challenges and realizing the potential of district policy to contribute to a better and more just education for children of color, children living in poverty, and immigrant children, as well as all others in U.S. schools.

Notes

[1]To protect the anonymity of the sites and participants in this study, I have not cited the news articles used to analyze and describe the Lakeside and Fairview contexts.

[2]*Plyler v. Doe* (1982) guaranteed immigrants' right to a public education irrespective of legal status.

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