

# The Multiple Meanings of (In)Equity: Remaking School District Tracking Policy in an Era of Budget Cuts and Accountability

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## Abstract

How do school district administrators make sense of educational equity as they undertake reform? This study examines tracking policymaking in two urban school districts. Using case studies and an interpretive approach, the study highlights school district leaders' shifting ways of making sense of tracking and (in)equity while facing achievement gaps, accountability pressures, budgets cuts, and support for tracking. Even after the emergence of powerful opposition, we find that district administrators continued to rethink the meaning of equity in relation to tracking and they pursued policies that expanded access to high-track classes and gifted education. While potentially widening educational opportunity, these moves fundamentally reinscribed the inequity of tracking in their schools.

## Keywords

school districts, equity, tracking policy, interpretive policy analysis, budget cuts, achievement gaps

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In urban school systems across the United States, school district leaders and scholars frustrated with the slow pace and challenges of sustaining school-by-school reforms have turned their attention to the district as a more equitable (Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008) and effective site for educational change (Cuban, 1984; Hightower, Knapp, Marsh, & McLaughlin, 2002; Levin, Datnow, & Carrier, 2012).

Yet, extensive research on urban education casts reasonable doubt about district policy as a lever for educational equity. As urban school systems experience academic failure, changing demographics, and severe budget cuts, they are increasingly sites of policy experimentation, even when these policies have not produced robust evidence of improved academic achievement (Berends, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Lipman, 2011). Indeed, contemporary and historical policies have frequently reinforced inequitable educational experiences for students of color, immigrant students, and children living in poverty and contributed to underachievement of these students in urban areas—even when these efforts have the expressed purpose of addressing educational disparities (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Tyack, 2004).

To understand why equity-oriented policies fail in urban schools, scholars have typically examined the effectiveness of policy designs, or they have focused on the struggle over interests in urban education policy and the ways that structural conditions contribute to inequitable outcomes. Research on urban school systems demonstrates that district decision makers are typically disconnected from working-class communities and communities of color (Dorner, 2011; Finnigan & Lavner, 2012; Frankenberg & Diem, 2013; Noguera, 2003). These leaders frequently enact policies that are responsive to local elites' preferences (Boyd, 1976; Cucchiara, 2013; Hochschild, 2005; Lipman, 2011; C. N. Stone, 1998). When urban district leaders do pursue equity-oriented policies, powerful opposition typically materializes to halt efforts that significantly alter the status quo (e.g., Boyd, 1976; Henig, Hula, Orr, & Pedescleaux, 1999; Holme, Diem, & Welton, 2014). District leaders tend to direct their attention to the technical challenges of policy design and implementation, leaving them underprepared for the inevitable conflicts over values and resources that arise from equity-oriented efforts (Holme et al., 2014; Mehan, Hubbard, & Stein, 2005; Oakes, 1992; Trujillo, 2013; Welner, 2001). As a result, district administrators frequently abandon policies that engender controversy, forgo efforts they foresee being controversial, or become co-opted by elite parents appealing to shared values (Boyd, 1976; Trujillo, 2013; Wells & Serna, 1996). Typically, district-led educational equity efforts go only so far.

District leaders can play an important role in both advancing and impeding equity-oriented policy in urban school systems; however, we know

strikingly little about how they make sense of and negotiate educational equity, a concept which has been defined in multiple, contrasting, and consequential ways in policymaking (McDermott, Frankenberg, & Williams, 2013; Rosen & Mehan, 2003; Scott, 2013; D. Stone, 2002). A growing body of research has drawn attention to the importance of school district administrators' interpretations and negotiation of meaning in district policymaking (Binder, 2002; Coburn, Toure, & Yamashita, 2009; Honig, 2006; Spillane, 1998). This literature illuminates how district administrators' individual worldviews, as well as social, organizational, and micro-political context, shape their understandings of instruction, and in turn, their policy decisions.

In this study, we investigate how district administrators in two urban school districts make sense of educational equity in policymaking that altered tracking. We use an interpretive approach and case studies of two medium-sized school districts located in small cities that are faced with challenges of resources, academic development of students, and increasing student diversity that are common in large urban areas (Milner & Lomotey, 2014), making them what Milner (2012) has called "urban characteristic." One school district was intentionally altering its tracking structure and one was not. Critically, and unlike most studies of urban education reform and untracking policy, our analysis uncovers the ongoing negotiation of the meanings of educational equity in urban school systems even after the emergence of powerful opposition to changing the status quo. We show that district administrators' sensemaking—informed by changing structural conditions in their districts, political pushback to untracking, and multiple and shifting ways of making sense of educational inequity—led to policy to expand access to high-track classes and gifted education, approaches that potentially increased educational equity but fundamentally reinforced the tracking structure. In showing how the framing of tracking policy and racial achievement disparities shifts over time and the political and cultural conditions under which this occurs, this analysis contributes to our understanding of how policies that have expressed equity goals can come to expand educational access *and* reinscribe inequity in urban school systems.

## The Politics and Culture of Tracking Policy

Tracking is the "process whereby students are divided into categories so that they can be assigned to groups in different kinds of classes . . . tracking, in essence, is sorting" (Oakes, 1985, p. 3). In the United States, tracking varies by school, district, and state; yet all forms of tracking ration children's access to resources such as good teachers, challenging curricula, credentials, and future opportunities on the basis of perceived academic ability (LeTendre,

Hofer, & Shimizu, 2003; Sapon-Shevin, 1994). While they need not be, “gifted” education, ability grouping, Advanced Placement (AP) classes, International Baccalaureate programs, and magnet schools that sort and stratify students on the basis of perceived ability or perceived intelligence can all be examples of tracking.

Tracking is rooted in cultural conceptions of intelligence, ability, and giftedness as innate traits that are easily identifiable and fixed at an early age (Ford & Whiting, 2008; Margolin, 1994; Morris, 2001; Oakes, Wells, Jones, & Datnow, 1997). Perceptions and measures of intelligence and ability have been historically contingent. Thus, intelligence and ability are more accurately conceptualized as social constructions than as scientific fact (Fass, 1980; Margolin, 1994; Oakes et al., 1997). These beliefs justify treating some children as deserving of special academic opportunities and others as undeserving. At the same time, administrators and school board members have also critiqued such programs, particularly gifted-education classes, as elitist and as contradicting goals of equal opportunity (Fleming, 2013; Spielhagen & Brown, 2008).

In a multitude of ways, tracking has been a mechanism of grave inequity in the United States. Prevailing views of intelligence reflect White, middle- and upper-middle-class culture. Schools use cognitive tests with demonstrated racial and cultural biases to identify children’s ability (Valencia & Suzuki, 2000). Children who possess White, middle-class cultural capital or are perceived to be members of those groups are more likely to be identified as “gifted” in schools (Margolin, 1994; Oakes et al., 1997). Even when their test scores are the same, they are more likely to be placed in high-track classes than their low-income Latino or African American counterparts and English learners (Callahan, 2005; Oakes, 1985). Furthermore, upper- and middle-class parents maneuver their children into high-level classes even when their previous achievement does not merit it (Useem, 1992). In sorting by race and class, tracking contributes to inequitable access to educational resources and challenging learning experiences, widened race- and class-based gaps in achievement, within-school segregation, and diminished opportunities for multicultural education (Gamoran, 2009; Oakes, 1985; Staiger, 2004). Additionally, the racial segregation that results from tracking can produce in students the identification of participation in high-track classes and other signifiers of achievement with “acting White” (Tyson, 2011). In the long run, tracking in high schools contributes to earnings inequality when youth enter the labor market (Moller & Stearns, 2012).

Despite the inequity that tracking facilitates, schools have long been resistant to untracking. Untracking, also called detracking, is an effort “to question existing track structures and promote greater access to challenging

classes for all students” (Wells & Serna, 1996, p. 94). Many educators and parents—especially White, middle, and professional class individuals—have raised formidable normative and political resistance to untracking (Kohn, 1998; Oakes, 1985; Wells & Serna, 1996; Welner & Burris, 2006). Parents have successfully undermined untracking by lobbying school board members, threatening to exit their school systems, co-opting educational leaders, extracting bribes from school administrators, and generating support from other parents (Kohn, 1998; McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999; Wells & Serna, 1996). Research to-date has focused on the roles of principals, classroom educators, and parents in perpetuating or challenging tracking. Less attention has been directed to understanding the role of district administrators in tracking policymaking.

The educational environment has changed considerably since many of the studies examining untracking policy were conducted. Recent reports in the U.S. media have sounded the alarm that “gifted” children and programs to serve them are being neglected, curtailed, or eliminated. Advocates of these children point to a lack of identification of children for “gifted” programs, cuts to funding, an erosion of program quality (Finn, 2012; Fleming, 2013) as well as federal and state policy that has focused schools on improving the achievement of lower-performing children (Hess, 2011; Spielhagen & Brown, 2008). Indeed, educators’ focus on “the achievement gap” is now commonplace in many districts, despite critiques that the term individualizes student outcomes and normalizes intelligence as White, upper- and middle-class in nature (Carey, 2014; Gutiérrez, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2013; Venzant Chambers, 2009). AP courses (Schneider, 2011) and International Baccalaureate programs (Conner, 2008) have spread rapidly in under-resourced schools over the past decade, a development that may be viewed as furthering tracking or as expanding educational opportunity. These developments, often unfolding at the district level, make an understanding of district leaders’ roles in tracking policy of critical relevance in urban education.

Leveraging the multiyear policymaking experiences of two urban school districts, this study builds on findings about the social construction of ability and potent opposition to equity-oriented policy that have traditionally book-ended untracking research. In attending to school district administrators’ role in tracking policy, we extend current understandings of tracking policy, and urban education policy broadly, as primarily shaped by structural inequities and changing demographic and fiscal conditions by examining the ongoing negotiation of the meanings people make of educational equity within those contexts.

## An Interpretive Policy Framework

We use an interpretive approach to policy analysis to examine district administrators' roles in the cultural and political dynamics of tracking policy. Rather than conceptualizing policymaking simply as an overt, instrumental, and rational activity, we examine policymaking as a social and political process of meaning making (Rosen, 2009; Schneider & Ingram, 1993; D. Stone, 2002; Yanow, 1996). Policy meanings—the values, beliefs, feelings, and identities that policies express—as well as the language and processes by which those meanings are created, communicated, interpreted, and contested are the central focus of analysis.

Interpretive communities, defined as groups with shared cognitive, linguistic, and cultural practices (Yanow, 1997), often hold contending views of what constitutes a problem or desirable policy response. This can present critical moments for negotiating what policies and practices mean, including reinforcing, extending, and mounting political challenges to discourses that are common in local context. Actors strategically frame problems or issues (Benford & Snow, 2000; D. Stone, 2002) or less consciously put forth taken-for-granted interpretations of a situation (Coburn, 2005; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). This may lead to policy contestation as well as the agreement necessary to policy formation. Crucially, policy negotiation does not end after formal policy formation, but may continue as a succession of actors enact or appropriate policy in ways that bring their sensemaking, values, and concerns to policy and practice (Coburn, 2005; Levinson, Sutton, & Winstead, 2009; Spillane, 1996).

Prior research suggests that groups of parents, school board members, and central office administrators hold diverse interpretations of policy. Negotiation of meaning among these groups is central to policy formation (Binder, 2002; Coburn, Bae, & Turner, 2008; Coburn et al., 2009; Spillane, 1998). District administrators' views can have a particularly important influence on how policy unfolds, even in the face of political opposition and differing cultural values (Binder, 2002; Coburn et al., 2009; Spillane, 1998).

Importantly, this policy negotiation is always situated within multiple policymaking contexts (e.g., organizational, socio-political, and economic contexts). Policymakers' interpretations may shift in response to a changing policymaking environment as "policy windows" open up (Kingdon, 1984) and individuals and groups inside and outside of school districts call for a response to changing circumstances (Hamann, 2003). Furthermore, contexts provide material affordances and constraints in policymaking, discursive material for local meaning making, and social interactions that may shape those local meanings. Particularly relevant for this study is the local

orientation to advantage as well as the fiscal and accountability pressures experienced by local education agencies.

Viewed through the lens of an interpretive policy framework, district policymaking is an ongoing process of meaning making, shaped by actors inside and outside of local government, who are situated in the multiple, complex contexts of many school systems. In this study, we attend to how district administrators, in their respective urban contexts, make sense of equity in interaction with other actors engaged in tracking policymaking.

## The Cases and Methods

This article draws on two case studies of tracking policy between 2005 and 2010 in two school districts confronting the ongoing budget cuts and accountability pressures that have become commonplace in urban school systems. In both districts, which had allocated specialized programming to elementary and middle school gifted-identified students and advanced course-taking opportunities to high school students identified for honors classes, administrators introduced changes that eroded the structural distinctions between regular education and the programming offered to students identified as high ability. Furthermore, both districts reduced staffing and cut gifted-education program budgets. While one district's administrators were attempting untracking, administrators in the other district were not expressly doing so. Comparing the evolution of tracking and untracking policy in these two school districts provides an opportunity to examine the how and why of equity-oriented policy change in this moment.

The analysis brings together separate qualitative data sets designed to examine the interpretive logics that district leaders drew on in policymaking in two medium-sized, urban school districts. Although the first study attended to district policymaking in relation to demographic changes (Turner, 2015) and the second study on policymaking in relation to budget cutbacks (Spain, 2016), both studies examined how district leaders made decisions about the wide range of policy questions that were arising in their fiscally strapped and racially and socio-economically diverse districts. Thus, a particular strength of this analysis is that tracking policy and its associated political dynamics emerged from the data as a significant concern in both districts, allowing us to study tracking politics within the wilds of the current contexts of urban school reform.

In analyzing these cases together, we attempt to develop a broader understanding of school district administrators' roles and meaning making in the politics of tracking policy. Despite differences in school district administrators' early support for untracking, the districts ultimately saw similar

outcomes and dynamics, suggesting that interpretive policy analysis could yield important insights into the cultural and political dynamics that contribute to untracking. Increasingly, education researchers are analyzing across studies to advance understanding of the complexity and variation of educational phenomena beyond single sites (e.g., Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, & Cucchiara, 2016). In this study, we build on the recognized value of case study methods for examining decision making and multiple, contrasting case studies for theory development (Yin, 2003).

### *Eaglemont*

Eaglemont is a California school district that served two smaller cities in a formerly rural region that had experienced rapid growth, including the development of both wealthy enclave neighborhoods and low-income apartment buildings. The district served between 20,000 and 25,000 students, about 20% of whom were African American, 30% Latino, and less than 30% White. More than half were eligible for federally subsidized meals. About one third of Eaglemont's students were also English language learners. In the 2009-2010 school year, about 12% of students were taking at least one AP course and 6% of students were enrolled in programs for gifted-identified students (Office for Civil Rights, 2012). During the study period, the district faced increasing accountability pressures, moving into district-wide sanctions under the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and facing the possibility of entering into state monitoring status. At the same time, statewide budget cutbacks and declining student enrollment meant that the district's budget declined by \$33 million over a 3-year period (2007-2008 and 2010-2011), a drop of about \$400 per student in district revenues.

Eaglemont was a district with strong school board support for tracking. School board members were all closely affiliated with two schools where the gifted magnet programs were located. As one board member declared, "We need programs for the high-achieving kids." Additionally, school district administrators, while critical of the programs, were not seeking to untrack schools. Yet, in 2009, as part of the district's budgeting process, Eaglemont administrators proposed consolidating two smaller magnet elementary school sites into a single site with larger class sizes. The move shifted elementary-aged "gifted" students toward regular classrooms within neighborhood schools, decreasing the number of students served by a separate magnet school and sorted into "gifted"-only classrooms.

In Eaglemont, a variety of district programs including the program for gifted-identified students, called GATE, had been undergoing cuts over several years. In 2009, instructional aide positions were also eliminated, leaving

no district staff members who were exclusively assigned to GATE programming. As an Eaglemont school board member explained,

[W]e did cut the GATE aides. We used to have a district-wide coordinator for GATE. And that position was eliminated probably 2 years ago. Uh, so this year we just had an assistant principal . . . who [also] had the responsibility for doing that.

### *Fairview*

The Fairview school district, located in a medium-sized Wisconsin city, serves a student population of between 20,000 and 25,000 students. Frequently viewed as a high-achieving district with White, middle-class students, the district was increasingly acknowledged as having a diverse student population and lower levels of academic proficiency, particularly for economically disadvantaged children of color. About 1% of students identified as American Indian, 10% Asian, 25% Black, 15% Hispanic, and 50% White. Just under half of students were eligible for federally subsidized meals. English language learners were 17% of Fairview's student population. In the 2009-2010 school year, approximately 15% of students were taking at least one AP course and approximately 5% of students were enrolled in programs for gifted-identified students (Office for Civil Rights, 2012).

Achievement scores for the 2009-2010 school year indicated that approximately 15% of Black, 20% of Hispanic, 35% of American Indian, 55% of Asian, and 65% of White students were proficient in mathematics. Only 20% of English language learners and students identified as economically disadvantaged were deemed proficient in mathematics. Reading proficiency scores were substantially lower for all groups (Department of Public Instruction, 2011). Though not as severe as in Eaglemont, school accountability pressures were intensifying. Seven of the district's schools were listed as needing improvement under NCLB in 2009 and the district itself was identified for having missed one or more adequate yearly progress (AYP) targets.

Fairview also faced substantial and increasing budget pressures. Over the prior decade the district had cut millions. The year of this study, the 2009-2010 school year, Fairview cut an estimated \$3.9 million from its budget even after receiving an additional \$5 million dollars from a 2008 local referendum. Over the course of the decade, Fairview significantly reduced the budget for the "gifted" program, known colloquially as TAG. A total program budget of just over a million dollars in 2001-2002 had decreased by one third by 2008-2009, leading to elimination of courses and enrichment activities for gifted-identified students over the years. Staffing for the program decreased

from 13 staff members early in the decade to 7.5 full-time equivalent (FTE) teachers in 2009; of these remaining positions, three had been left vacant for several years.

In Fairview, which was a self-described “liberal” city, the political climate was relatively favorable to untracking. During the 2000s, under the leadership of a former, long-term superintendent, elementary schools had eliminated pull-out programs for gifted-identified children and high schools untracked some subjects and grade levels as part of a high school reform.

### *Data Collection*

The data drawn on for this analysis include 31 semi-structured interviews (Patton, 1990) with district administrators and school board members (18 in Fairview and 13 in Eaglemont) and observations of district meetings (over 31 hr in Fairview and 28 hr in Eaglemont). The data sets were collected between 2009 and 2010.

In Fairview, the district in which administrators were explicitly in favor of untracking, study participants were selected based on their involvement in district policymaking. Interviewees included current and former superintendents, assistant superintendents, school board members, and midlevel administrators. Interviews focused on district policymaking in response to demographic changes in the schools. Tracking arose in the data as the first author observed policymaking and district administrators discussed decisions about how to address racial inequalities in schools. Noting the importance of this issue to district staff, the first author asked follow-up questions about tracking policies in interviews and attended public advisory meetings focused on changing policy for gifted education and advanced coursework in high school.

In Eaglemont, the district where administrators and school board members valued tracking, most respondents in the sample were selected because of their involvement in district budgeting activities (for example, district administrators and school board members) and familiarity with district decision-making processes. Interviews focused on understanding how districts were responding to changes in the state’s school finance system, which included the deregulation of funding for gifted education. Tracking arose in the second author’s observation of cutback decision making and district leaders’ discussion of achievement gaps. Interview questions asked specifically about funding decisions related to the state’s GATE program in the district, as this was one fund that districts could reallocate under changes to state law.

Additionally, each author reviewed documents such as school board minutes, district reports, newspaper articles, blogs, and web pages. For this analysis, we also collected additional data related to tracking, such as Department of Education data on participation in AP and gifted programming.

## Data Analysis

The analysis was conducted in two stages. First, each author designed and carried out a comparative case study, separately coding original study data using qualitative data analysis software and codes from theory, literature, and inductively developed codes. Both original analyses examined shifts in district tracking policy and included codes such as “talented and gifted,” “magnet,” and “differentiated instruction.” In discussions of our data, we were intrigued by the prominence of tracking to the district administrators in our respective studies. Similar dynamics across our sites called to mind research by Jeannie Oakes, Amy Stuart Wells, and colleagues on the role of social constructions in the politics of tracking. Thus, we embarked on this analysis, which examines district administrators’ meaning making in tracking policy.

To conduct a formal comparative analysis of the two data sets, we drew on the example set by Cucchiara and Horvat (2009). We developed case summaries of tracking policy in each district. We examined data coded in our original analyses and reviewed additional relevant data that were not part of the original coding for a second stage of analysis. We sought to balance our original research foci about district decision making in an environment characterized by a diverse student population (first author), and declining resources (second author) with emerging questions about tracking policy and related cultural meanings. We structured our case summaries to inquire into the nature of programs and services for students identified as high ability; proposals for change to these programs; the language and frames used to justify or oppose changes to tracking and TAG/GATE; frames related to racial inequality, deservingness/victims of accountability, budgeting/resources, and demographic change.

Over many months, we compared the new case summaries and exchanged analytic memos and data displays (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Through these analyses, we developed points of similarity and contrast between districts and with existing literature, explored patterns in how district leaders made meaning of tracking, and identified missing or disconfirming evidence across the two districts. We mapped the meanings that district leaders and others invoked to the policy trajectories in each district.

## Findings

In a context of accountability and budget cuts for public education, Fairview and Eaglemont school districts faced questions about tracking in their districts, and they interpreted and reinterpreted equity in relation to these pressures. First, we provide evidence that central office administrators understood honors classes and magnet “gifted” programs as in tension with their efforts

to address achievement gaps. Then, we show how local parents and school board members powerfully challenged district administrators' changes as inequitable. Third, while stories of equity-oriented policy in urban areas frequently end here, we uncover continued policymaking within the school districts and the interpretations of equity that subsequently emerged as district administrators made sense of the relationship between equity, tracking, and their local contexts in the accountability and budget cutting era.

### *Tracking Policies as in Tension With Closing Achievement Gaps*

While tracking has long been viewed as a necessary, efficient, and legitimate way to organize instruction in schools, Fairview and Eaglemont central office administrators engaged in policymaking that challenged their school systems' longstanding tracking policies. In both districts, administrators viewed tracking as contrary to a democratic ideal of equal access to educational opportunities and described tracking as a constraint on their efforts to address state and federal educational policy goals and achievement gaps. While "achievement gap" has been critiqued as a term that normalizes student performance as aligned with White middle- and upper-middle- class culture and that obscures the historical, systemic roots of underachievement (Carey, 2014; Gutiérrez, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2013; Venzant Chambers, 2009), district administrators in both cities frequently used this terminology to talk about and make meaning of racial disparities in educational attainment.

In Fairview, a critique of tracking as an impediment to addressing the achievement gap was central to district administrators' justifications for untracking. In 2006, for example, when high school reforms included some heterogeneously grouped classes, the superintendent explained to the local newspaper that the reforms addressed the fact that "many children of color and poverty are not meeting standards."<sup>1</sup> Another district administrator explained efforts to untrack some courses by saying they had been "mindful over time of the lack of diversity in our AP classes, in our upper math classes, just a number of sort of indicators." She pointed to racial disparities in enrollment in advanced courses as an indication of a problem of inequality.

In particular, district administrators viewed tracked classes as compromising the district's ability to address the achievement gap by limiting students' access to high-level coursework. In a letter to district families, the superintendent argued that the high school reforms "have to be concentrated on making a high level of demanding coursework accessible to all students." Later in the decade, Fairview administrators continued to argue that untracking would expand students' access to educational opportunities offered in high-level

tracks. An assistant superintendent explained, “Efforts have been made within the last 10 years . . . to start removing tracking, to remove prerequisites, have open access to classes, have support for entering AP classes.” Consistent with prior studies of untracking (e.g., Oakes et al., 1997; Wells & Serna, 1996), the critique of tracking as compromising equal opportunity was not unanimous. For example, the director of gifted programming publicly questioned the wisdom of high school untracking. Yet, on the whole, district administrators viewed tracking as an impediment to addressing the achievement gap.

In contrast to Fairview, untracking was never publically articulated as a priority in Eaglemont. Nonetheless, Eaglemont district administrators also viewed high-track programs as conflicting with efforts to address achievement gaps. In 2009, accountability pressures focused administrators on the achievement gap while Eaglemont confronted a budget cut of 9% with an additional 5% cut scheduled for the following year. Under these circumstances, district administrators felt the need to prioritize among educational programs. An assistant superintendent explained, “Because we’re so short-staffed, I can’t afford any time on the AP program. That’s an example of something that has to be set aside, to only focus on the goals and objectives in the [district improvement] plan.” Under a new state law that granted California school districts greater flexibility in the use of categorical funds (Spain, 2016), the district could reallocate dollars previously limited to “gifted” education to other priorities. This created a policy window (Hamann, 2003; Kingdon, 1984) for changes to district tracking policies.

Eaglemont district administrators proposed the consolidation of two elementary magnet programs for gifted-identified children as one response to budget pressures. An assistant superintendent emphasized the potential cost savings of consolidation by explaining “that program takes students from 17 schools . . . those kids could just be assimilated into the full-time equivalent [teacher] already given to that school . . . [resulting in] a reduction in staff.” In a public forum on budget cuts, the Eaglemont superintendent pronounced gifted education a district priority, saying, “We are very intent on preserving the GATE program” while arguing to consolidate the district gifted program to generate “savings of about \$240,000.” The superintendent characterized the proposal to close one magnet program site as financially prudent.

Despite the superintendent’s public claims, district administrators prioritized spending dwindling resources on raising achievement for lower-performing students and responding to accountability pressures. Staff reductions and programming cuts were occurring across the district, but not all programs were equally affected. While district administrators recommended cuts to “gifted” programming and consolidation of the magnet schools, they also

advised the school board to make a major investment in professional development programs in the areas of English language arts, mathematics, and English language development that were intended to respond to accountability pressures and achievement gaps.

Furthermore, Eaglemont district administrators viewed the magnet programs for gifted-identified students as inequitable because working-class children had limited access to the programs, which were located in the district's wealthier neighborhoods. In private interviews, central office administrators noted that the district did not provide transportation to magnet schools and argued that the magnet model was "terrible" for how it disadvantaged working-class families living outside the magnet sites' attendance boundaries.<sup>2</sup> This was not a critique of providing services for students identified as "gifted," but rather of the clustering of these services into specialized programs that limited access for low-income children identified as "gifted." Eaglemont district administrators saw eliminating a magnet school, a kind of untracking in that it would disperse children to neighborhood schools, as a strategy to improve educational access across their district.

In short, Fairview and Eaglemont district administrators' interpreted tracking as undermining their achievement gap efforts and as violating ideals of equal access, and they attempted to undermine tracking in their districts. The details differed, yet achievement gap and accountability concerns brought new decisions to untrack in both districts. Even in the absence of an explicit initiative to untrack in Eaglemont, district administrators' views about inequality contributed to changes to tracking.

### *The Counterframing of Untracking as Inequitable*

A subset of parents (and school board members, in the case of Eaglemont) vigorously objected to changes that district administrators made to tracking and gifted programs. As prior research suggests (e.g., Wells & Serna, 1996), untracking triggered substantial normative and political opposition, particularly from parents with children in high tracks. The prevailing argument among vocal tracking advocates—that untracking was inequitable—upturned administrators' sensemaking about equity. In both districts, advocates of tracking argued that district focus on closing the achievement gap had marginalized the needs of gifted-identified students. Their framing responded to a broader discourse and district administrators' sentiments that gifted education was not a top budgetary or instructional priority in their districts. As a board member in Eaglemont, the district that did not overtly pursue untracking, disapprovingly observed, "There's a lot of emphasis on helping the low end . . . We need programs for the high-achieving kids."

Parents and board members also argued that focusing resources toward lower-performing students meant taking resources from higher-performing children. Untracking has commonly been articulated in terms of a zero-sum game (e.g., taking from gifted-labeled children to give to “others”; Welner & Burris, 2006). In Eaglemont, parents at a gifted-education meeting voiced their dissatisfaction with cutbacks to the gifted program. For example, one parent observed that the district was not discussing cuts to its special education, college support program, or English as a second language offerings. In Fairview, the district that had been explicitly implementing untracking, an organized advocacy group noted in their analysis, “[I]t would be useful to compare [gifted] figures to the expenditures for other types of learners with specialized educational needs” implying that these figures would reveal how these children were being disadvantaged relative to “others.”

This counterframing of what counts as equity was accompanied by a portrayal of gifted-identified children as victims. Advocates argued that “gifted”-identified children were being excluded (see also, Spielhagen & Brown, 2008) and were losing out. At a school board meeting, a Fairview parent argued,

Some point to budget shortfalls and achievement gaps as the District’s primary focus and say that these crises outweigh the needs of academically gifted students. These problems, however, have not been solved by neglecting the needs of high-ability children.

Parent advocates’ framing of their children as victims of accountability policies and of a focus on children of color parallels contemporary colorblind discourses of Whites as victims of racism (Omi & Winant, 1994). Tracking advocates justified maintaining or expanding tracking by reframing administrators’ concern with the achievement gap as marginalizing “gifted” children.

Parents and school board members speaking in support of tracking also effectively framed the districts’ obligations to address the learning needs of gifted-identified students using the language of “all students” found in district leaders’ statements and the rhetoric of state and federal accountability policies (McDonnell, 2004; see also, Pollock, 2004). This language realigned existing frames (Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986) by positioning tracking as helping to meet the needs of “all students” and transforming the meaning of “all students” from addressing lower-performing students’ needs to meeting the needs of “gifted” students. This resonated with some school board members and directors of gifted programs, who drew on this language to counter untracking.

Additionally, in Fairview, where district administrators openly and explicitly critiqued tracking as inequitable, advocates of gifted programming argued that reinstating and expanding high-track classes and identifying larger numbers of students for gifted programs would contribute to greater access for children of color or children living in poverty. For example, website materials for the tracking advocacy group argued “the students who suffer the most [from untracking] are those with high potential who are also poor, African American, and Hispanic.” As one TAG advocate said in a school board meeting, “Kids from disadvantaged homes no matter their potential” were hurt by the existing practices of identifying children for gifted programming. In this way, tracking advocates portrayed their concerns as congruent with district leaders’ values (Snow et al., 1986).

In response to untracking efforts and budget cuts to gifted programming, advocates of tracking in Eaglemont appealed to school board members in both public and private forums. They met a sympathetic audience. Six of the seven members of the at-large elected Eaglemont school board lived in the neighborhood where the consolidated gifted magnet school was located. Although the school board eventually cut aid to the “gifted” program, there was strong board support for the program. Further, Eaglemont administrators described the political influence of tracking advocates with school board members as decisive in their decisions to limit changes to tracking or request further cuts to gifted programming. An Eaglemont executive-level administrator explained of the initial reductions to the gifted program in the midst of budget cuts in 2009:

Our board and our community really supports that GATE magnet program . . . [The school board] said, “No, we’re not going to cut the GATE magnet program.” So that’s why we maintained it. We did a reduction, but we are maintaining it.

A district accountant explained of the subsequent decision not to ask for more reductions to gifted programming in the 2010-2011 budget: “Some parents feel very strong[ly] about it, and so we’ve decided to just go ahead and keep it.” Thus, although district administrators had hoped to eliminate funding for the program and replace it with a new approach to services and instruction, they proposed no additional changes due to perceptions that further GATE reductions would not sit well with their community and board (see also, Boyd, 1976).

The nature and extent of both untracking efforts and mobilization in opposition to untracking in Fairview contrasted with Eaglemont. Advocates of tracking in Fairview drew on a number of political strategies to halt

untracking, but the threat that middle-class families would leave district schools proved particularly influential with school board members (see also, Hirschman, 1970; Peterson, 1981; Wells & Serna, 1996). As one executive-level district administrator explained,

It's a tiny group of people, but a very vocal group of people, and the kind of people that are not averse to saying, "If you don't do this for us, then we're going to take our children and leave Fairview, and then you'll be left with those kids you worry about so much."

This administrator was adamant that the district would not change in response to this pressure. Yet, school board members were eager to address tracking advocates' concerns. The exit of families from district schools was of significant concern to school board members (Turner, 2015; see also Hirschman, 1970) as this held potentially significant consequences for district budgets reliant upon state funding formulas linked to student attendance.

Despite administrators' doubts about the benefits of tracking, when confronted with pressures from parent advocates and school board support of tracking, district administrators tempered their public advocacy for and pursuit of untracking. Tracking advocates limited cuts to gifted programs and maintained distinct academic tracks. Typically the research literature ends here, with equity-oriented efforts to untrack aborted or drastically compromised. However, our findings suggest a shift in how students can legitimately be sorted through district policymaking in the accountability era. As we discuss next, how district administrators made sense of these events ushered in a new set of policies that more "equitably" sorted students.

### *The Rise of "Equitable" Tracking*

Despite opposition, district leaders' ongoing sensemaking about tracking and achievement gaps shaped tracking policies in consequential ways. Fairview and Eaglemont administrators advanced "equitable" tracking discourses that led to expanded access to high-tracked classes. Through discourses that emphasized the special educational needs of gifted students, the promise of individualization, and the societal impact of excellence for all students, district administrators merged concerns about equity and the achievement gap while simultaneously reasserting the status of "gifted" families and the practice of tracking.

*Gifted students and the achievement gap.* While Eaglemont and Fairview district administrators harbored doubts about the educational value and equity of

tracking, they responded to parent and school board opposition with public affirmation of “gifted” students and their families, positioning them as equally important to children labeled as “struggling” and “lower performing.” As described earlier, the Eaglemont superintendent publicly pronounced the value of gifted programs. In Fairview, an executive-level district administrator also described public recognition of gifted children as addressing tracking advocates’ discontent, particularly concerns about “gifted” children’s status in the district. This administrator advocated that the first commitment in the district strategic plan be “improving achievement for all kids while we eliminate achievement gaps for some kids.” He viewed conversations about “all students” as a way to unify school constituents by acknowledging concerns of gifted-education advocates that, “if you’re helping this group of kids, you’re not helping my kids as much...” while simultaneously maintaining a focus on the achievement gap.

However, the “all students” framing came to signify gifted-identified children, as district administrators and others counterposed “all students” with “struggling students” or the achievement gap. A midlevel district administrator explained, “We’re talking about all students learning, progressing. We owe that to all students, not just those that are struggling. So, I think we would all agree that that’s the right road.” Through this public “all students” discourse, district leaders accepted and fortified the assumption of innate ability that undergirds the “gifted” label and that ideologically bolsters tracking as necessary.

In addition, both districts created taskforces and solicited participation of tracking advocates in planning for gifted education. In Eaglemont, they reconvened a dormant gifted-parent committee and established a district plan to meet the needs of gifted-identified children despite program cutbacks. Fairview administrators and school board members intentionally invited advocates of tracking and gifted education to participate in strategic planning and established a committee to develop a gifted-education plan. By establishing committees to solicit greater involvement of tracking advocates in district decisions, district administrators reinforced the voice and status of gifted-identified children and their parents as actors who received special privileges from the schools.

*Individualization.* The discourse of individualization was central to tracking policy in both districts. The language of “individualization,” “differentiated instruction,” and “differentiation” frequently refers to the tailoring of curriculum or instruction to students’ unique learning preferences, skills and knowledge, and/or interests. Originally developed to promote inclusion of students labeled disabled into classrooms with their non-labeled peers, practices like

individualized learning plans and “flexible grouping” or “clustering” are intended to support individual students’ development while avoiding tracking. The approach has been advocated widely as an equitable pedagogical approach, including by proponents of gifted education (e.g., National Association for Gifted Children, 2010; Tomlinson, 2014).<sup>3</sup>

Individualization was prominent in Eaglemont despite the district’s lack of an explicit attempt to untrack. There, before budget cutbacks, a district-level “Coordinator of Differentiated Instruction” was responsible for language acquisition, school site intervention programs, International Baccalaureate, and gifted education. Additionally, gifted-identified students not attending a magnet program received individualized learning plans. Following parent pushback, the associate superintendent who had hoped to “rebuild the program” focused on developing differentiated instruction in non-magnet sites. The district moved toward clustering gifted-identified students in regular classrooms and targeting teacher professional development to meet students’ individualized learning plans. Eaglemont district administrators reasoned that teachers would better serve gifted-identified children in non-magnet sites through individualized instruction. They also viewed individualization as addressing the systemic inequality of wealthy children attending a magnet program not accessible to working-class children.

Some tracking supporters accepted the individualized discourse as consistent with their own goals for the preservation of gifted education in Eaglemont. For example, a few Eaglemont school board members viewed individualization efforts as improving the gifted program and recognizing its importance. One board member emphasized the changes as providing professional development for all teachers of gifted-identified students (rather than targeting magnet school staff). Another viewed changes to “how it’s offered, and who’s offering it, and where it’s offered” as contributing to reinvigorating the program and making it “a real star.”

After some parents launched a new effort to add high-track classes and additional programming for “gifted” education in response to untracking, Fairview district administrators also focused greater attention on individualization. Individualized plans had already been instituted in the elementary schools in an effort to identify and serve each gifted-identified child. Administrators promoted differentiation in meetings of the gifted-education planning group and the district strategic plan. They also talked about individualized plans as a part of the high school reform that would help meet the needs of gifted-identified students.

In contrast to Eaglemont, some Fairview advocates of gifted education rejected an individualized approach as appropriate and equitable for gifted-identified children. They characterized individualized plans as appropriate

for special education students but argued that separate classrooms for gifted-identified children, particularly at the high school level, was “more academically appropriate” and “emotionally appropriate” for the needs of “the very bright population” of children in Fairview. They also argued that individualized instruction and grouping practices were inconvenient for teachers.

District administrators in Eaglemont and Fairview invoked individualization discourses and practices in part because they believed these approaches were equitable ways of addressing diverse student needs. Yet, the focus on individualization risked obscuring educational and social inequality that can undergird differential achievement and placement in challenging classes in the first place.

*Excellence for all.* In Fairview, where the local political culture espoused equity and inclusion, school district administrators and others also drew on a discourse of “excellence for all” in tracking policy.<sup>4</sup> Schneider (2011) describes “excellence for all” as a discourse that bridges the excellence discourse ushered in by *A Nation at Risk* with equity discourse in American education, promising to bring “aspects of elite-level education to non-elite populations” (p. 39). Under pressure to develop a new plan for gifted education, Fairview district administrators enthusiastically embraced tools and practices intended to expand access to high-tracked classes or gifted programs for groups of students typically marginalized from such opportunities.

*Adopting additional identification practices.* The excellence for all logic undergirded support for new tools and procedures to better identify students of color and English learners as gifted. Fairview had relied upon standardized tests as well as teacher and parent nominations to identify “gifted” students, practices that were widely viewed as favoring White, middle-class students. Parents who advocated for tracking sometimes argued *for* expanding identification practices and the numbers of children identified for gifted programs on the basis that it would be more equitable. For example, a web page by tracking advocates argued for multimodal and bias-free identification tools “so that we do not miss the ‘hidden gems’ in our traditionally underrepresented populations.” The district office enthusiastically supported and advanced the adoption of alternative identification tools and practices as a way to reduce bias in placement into high-track classes and gifted programs. One member of the district gifted office said, “[W]e’re concerned that we’re missing, um, students’ needs . . . considering demographics, again, and based on our current model—we have *very* little representation from minority groups.” An executive-level district administrator who strongly opposed tracking noted

approvingly of the gifted office's efforts: "They're trying to kind of expand the definition and the identification process, which is terrific. That's exactly what we need to do." By 2009, as other efforts to change tracking and gifted programming stalled, Fairview allocated funds for additional identification tools. As the "hidden gems," language makes clear, this excellence for all discourse both supported expansion of identification practices and reinforced a special status for gifted-identified students.

*Growing support programs.* District administrators also promoted programs to increase the representation of low-income students and students of color in high-tracked classes, such as AP classes. They focused on expanding a support program for first-generation college students. An executive-level administrator explained,

[Y]ou can't just say, "Okay, everybody in AP." So we've added [a college-going support program] as a component at the high schools to get kids ready, and we're doing a tremendous amount of partnering with the community in terms of tutoring programs and mentoring programs.

This district administrator viewed the removal of prerequisites to high-tracked classes and the establishment of college prep and tutoring programs as addressing inequality in district schools. With strong opposition to eliminating course prerequisites, college support programs took on greater importance.

*Expanding honors and AP course offerings.* Finally, in the wake of opposition to untracking, district administrators expanded high-level tracks across Fairview high schools. This dovetailed with the newly adopted district gifted-education plan and reflected tracking advocates' argument that variation in high-track course offerings in district high schools was inequitable. In a local newspaper, a Fairview district administrator exemplified the excellence for all discourse, saying, "One aspect of the plan is to make sure that it's equitable regardless of the school or the grade level or the content area or the child." Bridging the excellence for all discourse with the differentiation discourse, the superintendent explained the expansion of high-track classes by saying, "Different kids are going to need different things." He argued that for that reason, "We are going to have to build capacity within the system to ensure that we develop more programming options, create more flexible opportunities for these students." In Fairview, both proponents and opponents of untracking supported "excellence for all" discourse and policies.

In short, in the wake of local opposition to untracking efforts, district administrators drew three discourses—gifted students *and* the achievement gap, individualization, and excellence for all—and associated practices to the center of district tracking policy. These discourses promised to remedy academic disparities and expand educational opportunities, addressing some of district administrators' equity concerns, and were often agreeable to advocates of tracking. Yet, these discourses, like colorblind discourses more broadly, were largely silent on the systemic school and social inequalities that contribute to and are reflected in tracking as a mechanism of inequality. Furthermore, they largely left tracking structures in place.

## Conclusions

In this study, we uncovered the multiple ways in which policy actors interpreted and negotiated the meaning of equity as tracking policy unfolded in two medium-sized urban school districts. Interpreting tracking as in conflict with addressing achievement gaps and as violating values of equal access to educational opportunity, Eaglemont and Fairview central office administrators weakened tracking when budget cuts and accountability pressures created policy windows for doing so. Yet through interaction with parents and school board members who opposed changes to tracked classes and “gifted” education, district administrators' understanding of educational inequality and its relation to tracking policy shifted over time. Ultimately, district leaders drew upon discourses that evoked equity and introduced practices that had potential to expand access to high tracks and gifted programs, while maintaining the overall tracking structure. These findings have important implications for understanding and acting on equity-oriented district policy-making in urban school systems.

First, this study extends scholarship on the politics of tracking. More than 20 years after much of the original groundbreaking research, we show how the changing context of public education, including budget cuts, accountability pressures, and concerns about the achievement gap—circumstances currently impacting urban school districts nationwide—opened up new policy windows for untracking in two districts and contributed to new discourses around tracking and inequality.

This research also contributes to scholarship on tracking that has emphasized the importance of social constructions of ability, intelligence, or educational practice in policymaking. Our research drew attention to the ongoing and socially negotiated interpretations of educational equity in tracking policy. School district administrators held and developed concerns about equitable education for students in their districts. In the face of potent opposition,

the multiple and evolving understandings of equity in relation to tracking contributed to the adoption of individualized education plans, multicultural and multilingual identification tools, AP expansion, college-going support programs, and other policies to expand access to high-tracked classes. The Eaglemont case indicates this may occur even when the local political culture is not broadly concerned with educational equity, district leaders are not actively undertaking an untracking effort, and despite pushback from parents and board members.

Second, this study contributes to our conceptualization of school district policymaking in urban areas, especially in relation to educational equity. School district administrators have frequently been conceptualized as capitulating to or being co-opted by local elites, antagonistic toward issues of equity, or oblivious to the conflict it may engender in policymaking (e.g., Finnigan & Lavner, 2012; Holme et al., 2014; Trujillo, 2013; Wells & Serna, 1996). Yet, like studies that highlight the role of sensemaking in district decision making (e.g., Binder, 2002; Coburn et al., 2009; Spillane, 1998), our findings indicate that district administrators' interpretations of equity—malleable, contested, and shifting over time—can prove highly consequential for equity-oriented reform. While scholars of urban education frequently attend to formal policymaking and show that structural factors shape policy in ways that lead to inequities for students of color in urban areas (Ladson-Billings, 2014), the ongoing negotiation of meanings, such as notions of educational disparity, also influence how policymaking unfolds. In illuminating district administrators' sensemaking, we show the crucial role that multiple interpretations of equity play in defining and promoting educational access in district policymaking. To be clear, consistent with the findings of other studies, the political influence of tracking proponents on school boards significantly limited policy alternatives. Furthermore, district administrators' efforts did not overturn tracking (nor in the case of Eaglemont, did they even attempt to do so). Yet, district policymakers' roles are important in the crafting of tracking policy, especially as policymaking moves from the school board meeting and into the central office. Furthermore, then, this study also extends studies of district leaders' instructional policymaking, suggesting that beyond the "what" and "how" of instruction, the political and cultural context of urban school districts also make questions of "who" central to district decision making.

These findings also raise important questions about what it means to untrack. Expanding access to gifted programs and high-tracked classes as they did in Eaglemont and Fairview was an effort to untrack by "promot[ing] greater access to challenging classes for all students" (Wells & Serna, 1996, p. 94). Furthermore, it proved to be a politically feasible strategy to enhance

educational equity. Yet, this may be a limited strategy for addressing structural inequalities in urban education. In promoting access and answering sharp critiques of tracking, the policies that district administrators went on to pursue may have legitimated tracking and educational sorting. Under the expanded access initiatives, overall systems of stratification and ideas about innate ability remained in place. Research and practice may benefit from conceptualizing untracking in a way that more clearly accounts for this seeming contradiction.

To be sure, this study affirms previous findings that traditional urban education politics contribute to the maintenance of educational stratification. Yet, for those pursuing equity-oriented reforms, this article suggests several practical points. First, even in times of budgetary and other environmental pressures, policy windows to expand opportunity and access can emerge. District administrators and others must be willing to create such opportunities or to take them when they present themselves. Second, how district leaders interpret and articulate equity is consequential for school structures and practices. District leaders can critically reflect on and challenge how people understand and frame equity in policy and practice. Any measure to address equity will require careful consideration of what equity entails and an effort to articulate that to others. Finally, as district policymaking is pursued in the name of educational equity, understanding how cultural and political dynamics can contribute to reinforcing inequity in urban schools, and acting to address them, is more important than ever.

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## Notes

1. Newspaper name is suppressed to protect study participants' anonymity
2. Student demographic data show, for example, the district's magnet sites (before and after consolidation) enrolled about twice the proportion of White students as the district's average. One administrator noted that the central office had toyed with completely closing the magnet program, an option that was never formally proposed to the school board.
3. For example, the National Association for Gifted Children's 2010 programming standard 3.1.4 ("Educators design differentiated curricula that incorporate advanced, conceptually challenging, in-depth, distinctive, and complex content for students with gifts and talents") (p. 4) identifies differentiation as an evidence-based practice for gifted education.
4. This discourse was not prominent in Eaglemont; however, the district had established similar identification practices and support programs in response to California laws passed years earlier.

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