

## CHAPTER 1

# Reimagining the Titans

### GUIDING PRINCIPLES

1. Antiracist school leaders eliminate systemic racism by examining and changing the existing practices within schools that limit educational opportunity for BIPOC students.
2. Antiracist school leaders engage the voices of all stakeholders, especially BIPOC stakeholders, when drafting organizational strategies and school policies.
3. Antiracist school leaders unapologetically take action to dismantle systemic racism and they confront opposition and barriers when they inevitably arise.
4. Antiracist school leaders learn how to use strategies to achieve their vision of racial equity.

In 2000, Walt Disney Pictures released *Remember the Titans*, a biographical sports film that captured the courage, determination, and boldness of the late high school football coach Herman Boone. The film highlighted the trials and tribulations of consolidating three high schools in the city of Alexandria, Virginia, into one high school, T. C. Williams. It extols football as a unifying force that brought White and Black people together during the turmoil of integration. The film portrays Coach Boone as a tough-as-nails Black man who loved his family dearly and who had the audacity to challenge the White former head coach, Bill Yoast. It's a tearjerker and a rousing sports film, all rolled into a feel-good story of a community overcoming its history of bigotry. And that's precisely the problem with the film: it depicts a

mythic story of racial healing that, for the most part, makes White people feel better about Black inequality and the meager efforts undertaken to redress that inequality.


The real story of why Alexandria merged its three high schools is more complicated than the version told in *Remember the Titans*. In 1965, as a brand-new high school (T. C. Williams) opened, Alexandria converted the Jim Crow-era all-Black Parker-Gray High School into a middle school and created high school attendance zones based on neighborhoods. The result was three officially desegregated high schools that mirrored the residential segregation of the city: Hammond High on the west side of town was virtually all-White. George Washington High School, on the east side and near the historically Black neighborhood of the Berg, had a Black enrollment of 25 percent, while the brand-new T. C. Williams, in the center of the city, enrolled roughly 12 percent Black students (Reed, 2014). Those enrollment figures proved to be highly unstable as White flight from desegregated schools on the east side of town drove up the percentage of Black students at George Washington High School, which quickly developed a reputation among Whites as the “Black” high school in Alexandria.

Tensions among students also grew, particularly as school leadership proved unable or unwilling to foster the relationships among students and staff that would overcome long histories of distrust between White and Black in Alexandria. In the fall of 1970, the city’s schools were in turmoil. The murder of Robin Gibson in May 1970 by a 7-Eleven clerk who claimed Gibson had shoplifted some razor blades led to six consecutive nights of protests. In November 1970, a hung jury failed by an 11–1 vote to convict Gibson’s murderer. Earlier that month, members of the American Nazi Party burned crosses on school grounds. These events seethed through Alexandria’s high schools, galvanizing Alexandria’s Black youth who demanded that a school system long accustomed to ignoring their needs actually address their demands, which ranged from a relaxed disciplinary policy to more Black teachers to more courses in Black culture and history. In the view of Superintendent John Albohm, racial conflict permeated the schools and the geographic division of the three high schools exacerbated those tensions. As the school board chair remarked later, disciplinary matters and poor morale “were tearing the system apart” (Reed, 2014, p. 75). Albohm’s solution to these conflicts was to create one very big high school—which just happened to have a very good football team. In May 1971, the school board voted to merge the city’s three high schools, effective that fall, sending the city’s junior and seniors to T. C. Williams and the sophomores and

freshman to the two former four-year high schools. The rest is cinematic history, marked by an undefeated season and a state football championship.

Although the film *Remember the Titans* ends at the conclusion of the 1971 high school football season, the story of racial conflict within Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) did not. While later conflicts may not have been as explosive, the racial tensions experienced in 1971 continued throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s—not only in the city of Alexandria and ACPS but nationwide as well. The Hollywood version of desegregation shows Black and White students, along with Black and White community members, overcoming their animosity to live together, if not peaceably then at least as a single community. As Denzel Washington, playing Coach Boone, told the players when he took them to the Gettysburg Battlefield, “I don’t care if you like each other or not, but you will respect each other.” The problem is that the Hollywood story of winning grudging respect, forged out of a common effort to achieve victory, has little to do with the reality of the deep disrespect many school systems, including ACPS, continue to hold for the educational opportunities of BIPOC students.

On its surface, the narrative of *Remember the Titans* echoes the same narrative that many BIPOC students in Alexandria (and across the nation) face as they attend one of the largest and most diverse high schools in the country. The surface equanimity and get-along attitudes of teenagers as they navigate the interpersonal relations and conflicts of adolescence are demonstrably better than it was in the late 1960s and early 1970s. But that superficial, Hollywood view does not show the systemic racism and racial disparities that remain to be dismantled. *Remember the Titans* captured the mythic qualities of integrating the T. C. Williams High School football team, but it did not show us truly integrated classrooms, curricula, and challenges. In reality, T. C. Williams—like many large high schools throughout the United States—is an intricate work of student racial segregation within an integrated building. Today, the students of color in ACPS are still isolated from their White peers through a form of modern-day de facto segregation, through programs like Advanced Placement, Dual Enrollment, Talented and Gifted programs, and special education.



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In the film and in real life, students and players sing T. C.’s fight song, “We are the Titans . . . the mighty mighty Titans.” We’ve even seen police officers lead Black Lives Matter protesters in that cheer to show their solidarity. What that song fails to address, however, is that not all Titans are treated equally or

equitably. Both implicit and explicit double standards exist for BIPOC students in ACPS and their White counterparts. But that's not unusual: achievement and opportunity gaps between White students and BIPOC students across the United States are pervasive and they have been since the inception of public education.

The barriers that deny Black students access to a high-quality education are numerous, ranging from course selection, to disciplinary systems, to over- (and under-) identification in special education, to pervasive beliefs about Black failure among mostly White teachers, beliefs that oppress and colonize the minds of BIPOC students. Unfortunately, US society appears to have accepted the myth that the color of your skin determines your destiny. In this book, we are unapologetic about exposing and confronting those who continue to perpetuate these unequal structures and inaccurate ideologies. By identifying these systems of injustice, and showing how schools can dismantle them, this book lays out what is necessary to finish the job started in *Remember the Titans*—the achievement of a truly equitable and antiracist school system.

ACPS is one of the most diverse school systems in the country with students from over 120 countries enrolled in the city's only public high school, which in April 2021 changed its name from T. C. Williams to Alexandria City High School. We can sing the school's fight song, *We Are the Titans*, but then we all go our separate ways once the game is over. Today, fifty years after three high schools merged, students experience achievement and opportunity gaps that are more pervasive than before. In 2019, all of T. C. Williams' National Merit Semi-Finalists were White—just as they were in 1971. Despite the growing diversity of T. C. Williams, the fact that highly visible leadership positions and high academic honors persistently accrue to only White students indicates that something is systematically excluding BIPOC students from these accolades. But students are not accepting this state of affairs. Just as in 1971, BIPOC students at T. C. are mobilizing and speaking out, through the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN), a national organization striving to diminish achievement and opportunity gaps in public school systems across the United States. Through these efforts, they are demanding that the school and school system leadership address these opportunity gaps and build a truly equitable school and school system. But the challenges are daunting.

# CHALLENGES TO EQUITY AND INCLUSION

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## ADVANCED PLACEMENT

Consider Advanced Placement. Like most schools across the United States, the Advanced Placement (AP) courses at T. C.—which enable students to earn college credit while in high school—are filled, mostly, with White students and a few BIPOC students. When asked why they don't enroll more frequently in AP courses, BIPOC students often express not just feelings of exclusion or isolation in AP but describe explicit experiences of discrimination and oppression that drive them away. Often the rebukes from teachers and students center on assumptions about *who belongs* in AP, with the prevalence of White students defining a traditional WASPy classroom culture that is unwelcoming to BIPOC students. Moreover, until recently AP teaching assignments are frequently awarded to mostly White teachers, who often do little to engage BIPOC students, compounding their sense of isolation and lack of support. Why go where you're clearly not wanted?

## DISCIPLINE STANDARDS AND PRACTICES

Zero tolerance discipline policies are part of a harsh discipline system that mirrors a prison mentality. Like criminal justice systems across the United States, school discipline policies often employ a double standard for BIPOC students compared to their White peers. When sanctions are leveled unequally for similar offenses—depending on the race of the perpetrator—BIPOC students lose access to learning, have their school record permanently marred, and receive the message that they are unwanted. Rather than rely on a punitive disciplinary process that feeds a school-to-prison pipeline (particularly for students of color), schools need to see discipline as an opportunity not to exclude students from schooling but to help form citizens of the future and to shape individuals who have an understanding of how their actions affect the community around them. A school discipline program anchored in restorative practices places students at the center of creating a vibrant and expressive community in which norms of behavior emerge from a sense of student belonging. Rather than demanding compliance and punishing students when they do not comply, a restorative practice program empowers students to regulate and enforce the norms of behavior that facilitate learning within a school. We see these programs as essential to ensuring racial justice within schools.

## SCHOOLS ARE DESIGNED TO PERPETUATE INEQUALITY: A LOOK AT YESTERDAY AND TODAY

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Despite the growing racial, ethnic, national, and linguistic diversity in US schools, the educational system in the United States seems to have only one template for student success and that template is clearly color-coded. School systems and practices in the United States were designed to boost and aid White students but thwart and obstruct BIPOC students. Many of those practices have not ended, despite the end of legally mandated segregation. One must know our nation's and our schooling history in order to not repeat it. When schools initially desegregated across the country, White educational leaders founded private schools to enable affluent White families to avoid racially mixed schools. At the same time, special education services and talented and gifted programs became indirect ways to keep BIPOC students and White students apart.

History seems to continue to repeat itself. In 2020, as the world confronted a global pandemic and schools remained closed, virtual learning became the new normal for public education. But many White families with financial means established learning pods to ensure that their children continued “on track,” justifying the exclusive nature of in-person learning in the COVID era as essential childcare for two-career adults. These learning pods brought together small groups of kids to learn, collaboratively, in conjunction with online public schooling, often with privately hired tutors or teachers to facilitate these pods. Small, intimate, expensive, and likely of high quality, these learning pods simply exacerbated the most recent trends of declining support for public education.

Moreover, as parents hired tutors and teachers and drew on social networks and social capital to form learning pods, they explicitly worsened the divisive gap between the haves and have-nots. They also entrenched the color line in public education. Indeed, this learning model is not far removed from the concept of White flight during the integration of public schools in the 1960s and 1970s. We share this to emphasize that if we do not know our history of withdrawal and exclusion, then we are bound to repeat it. It is unconscionable that our public educational systems across the United States continue to not serve our BIPOC students well and in some cases not at all.

## BECOME ANTIRACIST

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It's time to change the narrative for public education across the United States, ensuring that all students regardless of their life's circumstances, zip code, race, gender, socioeconomic status, or educational ability are engaged in learning experiences that prepare them to become productive global citizens who attain success. The cessation of overtly racist practices is not enough to halt the pernicious effects of racism. We need, in the words of Ibram X. Kendi, to become antiracists—as teachers, school leaders, parents, and community members. Without taking on this perspective, efforts to create equitable school systems will fail. School systems across the country might strive to provide a safe learning environment where staff are culturally competent and diversity is supposedly embraced; however, without antiracism at the heart of this work, schools—and the legacy of racism within schools—will continue to oppress, misunderstand, and damage BIPOC students. We consistently hear our educators say they are not racist—especially our White educators. If no one is racist, why do we tolerate racist outcomes? We need more than just non-racists leading and teaching in schools; we need antiracist educators leading our schools and teaching our students.

The six steps outlined in the preface and each chapter of this book are not easy steps, but they are simple steps. Their simplicity, however, demands courage and boldness to first identify and then dismantle systemic and institutional racism in our public schools. And even though they are not easy, these steps are essential: educators determine the future of our country and, right now, they are nurturing and developing the next generation of leaders in the world—White and BIPOC. We have accepted the status quo in public education across the United States for far too long and the time is now to reject—unapologetically—racist acts, behaviors, practices, policies, people, and ideologies that contaminate our educational philosophies and practices. Take the pulse of your school system. This checklist might help you get a sense of how closely your school or district adheres to antiracist principles.

### IS YOUR SCHOOL AN ANTIRACIST SCHOOL?

- Are White and BIPOC students suspended at the same rate?
- Do low-income students receive the same educational experience as higher income students?

- ❑ Are BIPOC students identified as in need of special services for emotional disabilities at the same rate as White students?
- ❑ Are BIPOC students identified for learning and reading disabilities, such as dyslexia at the same rate as White students?
- ❑ Are you taking actions to identify and address issues that negatively affect BIPOC students?
- ❑ Are you eradicating any practices that disproportionately inflict trauma on BIPOC students?
- ❑ Do you have a representational number of BIPOC teachers and staff among your faculty?
- ❑ Do all teachers have the cultural competence to engage BIPOC students in their classrooms?
- ❑ Are you taking actions to address racial inequities in your school?

Today, the evidence is increasingly clear that public school systems harm BIPOC students by not being antiracist, by inflicting trauma on them throughout their educational experiences, and by ignoring horrific racial inequities in our schools. If you answered “no” to any of the items on the checklist and have not done something to dismantle these practices, then you have not demonstrated the courage and boldness needed to change this narrative in public education. Tackling these issues requires that all of us, as individuals, make a commitment to racial equity in our public schools, in our own school systems, and across the nation.

The issue is not only one of social justice but of fundamental public health. The fact is that racism imposes psychological damage and traumatic experiences on BIPOC students. A meta-analysis review of 138 studies in the *International Journal of Epidemiology* reported that self-reported experiences of racism or discrimination among adults was highly associated with negative mental health outcomes for people of color, with 72 percent of the studies showing a negative relationship. Over a third of the studies found that individuals suffered negative physical health outcomes when they reported having experienced discrimination or racism (Paradies, 2006). These findings align with other studies that show adverse childhood experiences (known as ACEs) affect both a child’s education and life outcomes. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Kaiser



Permanente collaboratively studied the effects of traumatic experiences during childhood for roughly 13,500 adults and the impacts of these experiences on the health status, incidence of disease, and prevalence of risky behaviors as adults. The study found, among other things, that persons who experienced four or more ACE factors had a four- to twelvefold increased risk for alcoholism, drug abuse, depression, and suicide attempt, when compared to respondents who had no ACE factors (Felitti et al., 1998).

If we regard school-based discrimination and racism as an adverse childhood experience (as we should), these studies suggest that there are lifelong mental and physical health implications when children are exposed, over the long term, to schools that systematically deny them opportunities to learn and to advance based on their race. Of course, these adverse experiences of racism are not limited to childhood; BIPOC students experience ongoing stressors as adults and over their life span—with profound health implications. One study of the experiences of over 1,300 African American women found that higher perceptions of on-the-job racial and ethnic discrimination were linked to significantly higher levels of job-related stress, which has long been shown to have clear health implications. Importantly, women with higher levels of education perceived greater levels of discrimination. Whether experienced as an adult in the workplace or as a student in the classroom, racism and discrimination produce systemic health effects for people of color, throughout their lives.


In 1758, Carl Linnaeus, known as the father of taxonomy, developed the first classification system for the human race. Specifically, he used a color scheme to identify what we refer to today as different races. His groupings included four categories: white European, dark Asiatic, red American, and black Negro. Linnaeus even applied “descriptive” labels to the “characteristics” of the types of humans he identified: white people as hopeful; dark people as sad and rigid; red people as irascible; and black people as calm and lazy. Over 100 years ago, W. E. B. Du Bois objected to the practice of viewing race as rooted in biological differences of Black and White people rather than in the social and cultural differences of human beings. As one learns about the historical contexts of race, the negative images and descriptors of BIPOC students come into immediate focus; these terms and images are still projected into the world. These images and stereotypes and characterizations sustain and expand the racist ideology that permeates public educational institutions across our country. The ludicrous myth that race is rooted in biological differences among human beings has

unfortunately shaped how we treat BIPOC students in public education in the United States—and not in a good way.

In schools across the United States, educational tracking has been central to widening the achievement gap. In our day (back in the 1970s and 1980s), elementary students were assigned to the Bluebirds or Redbirds reading group. Today, our public educators have gotten savvier with tracking and now use practices such as pull-out services, self-contained classrooms, advanced level courses, and international academies to place students in classrooms based on their ability levels. These educational practices unfortunately have wide currency in public education and some public school systems have even convinced families and educators that these practices are best for their children, especially BIPOC children.

Generating the political will to take action is not sufficient, however. To dismantle systemic racism in public education across the United States, we must think and plan strategically in order to overcome adversity and obstacles. While the moral case for meeting all students' social, emotional, and academic needs is abundantly clear, in reality, any school or school system division that unapologetically takes action to dismantle systemic racism will confront opposition. At this juncture, you must be ready to relentlessly make what John Lewis called “good trouble” in order to prevail. Strategic thinking and strategic planning are the most important components of dismantling systemic racism. Political savvy will enable you to navigate the tough road ahead.

A strategic thinker pursuing antiracism must be self-reflective and always strive to understand the justification and rationale for a particular decision. You must be able to answer the questions, “What is compelling about this decision?” Not, “Why are you forced to make this decision?” But “What makes this decision necessary?” That reasoning, that compelling why, tells you and others what is at stake in your decision-making process. As you find your compelling why, you must also anticipate the reactions, obstacles, outcomes, and potential shortcomings you will encounter. Strategic thinking requires self-efficacy and competency. But most of all, to strategically plan how to construct an antiracist school or school system, you must build a coalition of allies and coconspirators who can support you while you navigate the troubled waters of systemic racism. This book will provide insight on how to establish your coalition and refine your practice through strategic thinking and planning.



To strategically plan how to construct an antiracist school or school system, you must build a coalition of allies and coconspirators who can support you while you navigate the troubled waters of systemic racism.

Strategic planning with courage and boldness will provide your organization with the road map to an antiracist school system and also unapologetically remove barriers and set high ambitions for the system. These ambitious, yet attainable goals will fuel the success of your students. In order to dismantle systemic racism and become an antiracist school or school system, one must ensure that the organization's mission, vision, and core values are aligned with the organization's belief that all students will learn, as well as emphasize the importance of eliminating both achievement and opportunity gaps in public education. Racial equity must be at the heart of the organization's day-to-day operations and planning.

Strategic thinking and strategic planning are intertwined and must be at the forefront of dismantling systemic racism in public education. You cannot combat systemic racism without a strategic plan, and that plan requires you—and your school system—to commit to ensuring all students are treated equitably. You will confront relentless naysayers and those who oppose the antiracist movement. Thinking your way, strategically, through leadership and planning your desired outcomes, without apologies, are essential attributes of creative leadership. The current landscape of racist schooling requires astute and nimble strategic planning and thinking; without those skills, you will lack the tools needed to construct a public education system free of racism, oppression and inequity.

## PLAN OF THIS BOOK

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### CHAPTER 1: GET INTO GOOD TROUBLE

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This chapter has given you a sense of our background and experiences, as well as our perspectives on racism in public education and a sense of our commitments. We envision this book as a guide to help you create not just a non-racist school or school system but an antiracist one. We will tackle six steps of this work: (1) knowing your history; (2) committing fully to racial equity; (3) dismantling tracking and within school segregation; (4) transforming school discipline practices; (5) engaging in strategic thinking and planning; and (6) leading with boldness and courage. These steps form the foundation of an antiracist school system.

## **CHAPTER 2: KNOW YOUR HISTORY TO REWRITE YOUR FUTURE**

In Chapter 2, we address the importance of knowing your history—both locally and nationally—and understanding the narrative of racism that has shaped the experiences of students and teachers in your school. Knowing the stories of an explicitly racist past and connecting them to the experiences and actions of students and teachers and leaders of today enables us to better understand and confront the racism that persists within our educational institutions. Uncovering these counter-narratives and connecting them to current contexts of education contextualizes the challenge of creating antiracist school systems.

## **CHAPTER 3: COMMIT TO RACIAL EQUITY**

In Chapter 3, we examine what it means to fully commit to racial equity—and how that commitment will suffuse an organization. By placing racial equity at the center of a school system, educational leaders extend the promise of public education beyond the circle of students and families that have historically benefited from it. The structures, pressures, and systems that continually regenerate and sustain inequity are often central features of schools and school systems—whether it is the social capital wielded by parents of influence or an accountability structure that forces teachers to triage reading interventions. Committing to racial equity means recognizing those patterns and reversing them.

## **CHAPTER 4: DISMANTLING TRACKING AND WITHIN-SCHOOL SEGREGATION**

Chapter 4 turns the analysis to tracking and the curricular and aspirational objectives that school systems hold for their students. The chapter tackles the question of how to de-track a school system. The central task in de-tracking is to move teachers and curricula away from fixed notions of student ability and achievement and to reinforce rigorously to teachers and staff the primacy of a growth orientation to student achievement.

## **CHAPTER 5: MAKING SCHOOL DISCIPLINE DIFFERENT FROM POLICING**

Chapter 5 shows how school disciplinary systems connect to broader patterns of policing and incarceration in the United

States. We need to ensure that teachers, particularly White teachers, have the cultural competence to engage BIPOC students in their classrooms. Additionally, school systems need to adopt restorative practices that seek to repair the injury to the school community when a disciplinary infraction occurs. The continued use of prevailing disciplinary procedures will only grow the school to prison pipeline and stifle the educational aspirations of students of color, particularly African American boys, who are grossly overrepresented in detention, juvenile court, and the prison system.

## **CHAPTER 6: IMPLEMENT STRATEGIC THINKING AND STRATEGIC PLANNING**

Chapter 6 engages the need for strategic thinking and strategic planning as one undertakes the task of building an antiracist school system. Through strategic thinking and planning, you can identify potential allies and coconspirators who will be willing to support your work and join your courageous efforts as well defuse or ameliorate the objections of others. The point of this chapter is to clarify that building an antiracist school system doesn't just happen; it requires a strategy to achieve objectives and it requires planning to weave those objectives into a coordinated effort that institutionalizes the commitment you've made to students and to the community.

## **CHAPTER 7: CHOOSE GOOD TROUBLE: BE A BOLD AND COURAGEOUS ANTIRACIST SCHOOL LEADER**

Chapter 7 ties these concrete actions together by showing the importance of courage and boldness in leadership. Committing a school or a school system to an antiracist agenda means that leaders must eschew timidity or an acceptance of the status quo. Tackling racial inequities, academic disparities, and historical oppression will likely be one of the most emotionally, physically, and spiritually draining endeavors of your career. You must also possess self-efficacy and believe that you can be a part of the change for the nation. Overcoming adversity will require you to be unapologetic about no longer accepting the status quo within public education—especially when it comes to BIPOC children.

## **CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION**

Chapter 8 concludes the book with some resources for causing Good Trouble and reemphasizes the need to recommit schools

and broader society to the notions of equity and the value of activist leadership. Our hope is to engender school and community leaders who have the skills, dispositions, and knowledge needed to build antiracist school systems so that the values of equity and equality will persist and thrive in schools across the United States. The time to act is now.



## Reflective Questions for Getting Into Good Trouble

### 1. Personal Reflections

- To what extent has your personal history and cultural background shaped and influenced your reactions to race and equity?
- What do you consider your strengths and challenges in leading for equity?

### 2. Organizational Insights

- What are the major challenges and issues related to racial equity within your current school or school system?

### 3. Initial Steps

- What are two to three initial steps or actions you can implement to address these issues?

### 4. Long-Range Possibilities

- What action do you believe would most likely ensure that BIPOC students experience long-term success in your school?
- What will your system look like if explicit bias, implicit bias, and systemic racism no longer impact student and staff performance?

### 5. Anticipated Barriers and Challenges

- How will you involve the voices and experiences of key stakeholders (e.g., students, staff, parents, board members, community) in this process?