

Defending Black Education Futures: The Power of Black Educational Leadership

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Introduction

> "Black people are already enough, capable, and worthy of living in the fullness of their humanity and recognizing, even dreaming about, what is possible" (Stanley, 2024, p.1).

I start this brief by affirming the praxis and potential of Black education and recognizing Black educational leaders as key figures in the fight for Black liberation. Historically, these leaders have resisted anti-literacy laws, created self-sustained schools, founded institutions, and fought for equal resources while maintaining high expectations for their communities (Anderson, 1988; Walker, 1996). Today, many continue to build on the legacies of pioneers like Septima Clark and Mary McLeod Bethune. For instance, Summer Gaston Gehris, a principal at Martin Luther King Elementary in Fresno, CA, reflects on her uncle's role as the city's first Black principal. Despite the persistent challenges to her leadership, she surrounds her Black students with Black educators who are committed to their humanity and well-being. Similarly, Ashanti Porter, a principal in Baltimore, emphasizes creating affirming spaces for her predominantly Black students, whom she affectionately calls "legends," helping them realize their worth and potential (Marrero, n.d.). These leaders exemplify the enduring commitment to Black educational possibilities.

Purpose

The primary purpose of this policy brief is to reaffirm the humanizing and liberatory possibilities of Black educational leadership (Lomotey, 2022) under the Trump

Administration. The contemporary Black educational leadership workforce is destabilized in ways that fracture and isolate many Black leaders, constraining their historical commitments to Black liberation. Black educators and leaders continue to feel the vestiges of desegregation efforts and dismissals of Black education leaders, which all but devastated Black educational communities (Tillman, 2004). Today, Black educational leaders face challenges in attaining and retaining positions in contemporary public schools and districts (Taie & Lewis, 2022). Although scholarship continues to highlight the ongoing benefits of Black educators and leaders for Black youth, leadership preparation, state education policy, and district hiring practices have disrupted the Black leadership workforce (Berry & Reardon, 2022). Simultaneously, Black students are continuing to experience visceral harm and state-sanctioned violence in the forms of under-education/miseducation, divestment in their public schools, over-disciplining, and over-referrals to special education. One potential cause of these state-defined achievement inequities may be the underrepresentation of Black educators and leaders in state public schools (Jang & Alexander, 2022). Yet, we know that representation of Black people in educational leadership is a necessary yet insufficient goal; Black educational leadership must be connected to liberation.

Why Black Educational Leaders?

Black educational leaders consistently create systemic approaches to sustain Black educational spaces focused on possibility and liberation (Joseph & Shockley, 2021; Lomotey, 2022). Despite the challenges of Jim Crow schooling, these leaders utilized local Black communal assets to enhance educational opportunities and combat state-sanctioned exclusion through high-quality education (Anderson, 1988; Siddle Walker, 1996). They fostered institutional environments emphasizing communal knowledge, high expectations, and strong school-community relationships (Walker, 1996). Contemporary Black leaders sustain these commitments by employing ethno-humanist strategies, centering on Black feminist and womanist approaches, and highlighting cultural and communal assets and knowledges to cultivate joy, compassionately nurture, and support Black youth in navigating hostile educational environments (Khalifa, 2018; Lomotey, 2022; Peters & Miles Nash, 2021). Additionally, research shows that Black teachers are less likely to leave schools led by Black leaders, which can help reduce racialized discipline disproportionalities (Rodriguez et al., 2025; Welsh & Sobti, 2023). Jang and Alexander (2022) also found that the instructional leadership of Black women principals has a positive impact on the achievement of Black students. Although some studies focus on state-defined metrics and indicators, collectively, this scholarship highlights the enduring significance of Black education leaders, particularly for Black youth.

Scope and Audience

This policy brief relies on publicly available data, national and state-level news media, secondary data analyses, and a review of empirical literature to:

1. discuss the state of Black educational leadership nationally,
2. examine the district and school conditions experienced by Black educational leaders, and
3. imagine how Black educational leaders can support Black communities to collectively navigate these socio-political times and secure more liberatory Black education futures.

This brief is for Black education leaders, district and state leaders, educational researchers, policymakers, and advocacy organizations committed to supporting Black leadership visions to sustain more liberatory futures for Black educational communities.

Definitions

My conceptualization of *Black* acknowledges the vast ways that Black people exist. Hence, I am naming those who self-identify as Black, Black immigrants from the continent (e.g., Ethiopian, Liberian, Somali), Black refugees, Afro-Caribbeans, Afro-Latine, and the many intersections of Black people (e.g., Black women, Black Muslims).

Black Educational Leaders: Black people who lead schools and/or districts as principals, assistant principals, and superintendents. I recognize that Black educational leaders are present in various district positions (e.g., equity

directors), at the state-level, within Black communities, and in higher education settings.

Black Educational Communities: Black students, families, educators, and leaders who have interactions with/are significantly impacted by public schools.

Background and Context

Recent events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, surfaced the deeply embedded inadequacies of school districts and their service to Black youth, families, and communities (Douglass Horsford et al., 2021). The 2021 BERC COVID-19 study report (Douglass Horsford et al., 2021) revealed that schools and districts must invest in more comprehensive repair and support when working with Black educational communities. Some recommendations include protecting and defending Black students' civil rights, providing counseling and mental health services, implementing curricular and pedagogical interventions (e.g., cultural relevance), and fostering relational repair within Black educational communities (Douglass Horsford et al., 2021). In times like these, Black communities should look to Black education leaders for guidance. However, where are the Black educational leaders? Further, to what extent are schools and districts prepared for their leadership?

Where Are Black Educational Leaders?: The National Landscape

Black educational leaders are underrepresented in the public education workforce compared to the Black student population (approximately 15%) overall. A recent IES survey, which includes a nationally representative sample of public and private schools across the 50 states, revealed that Black principals represented approximately 9.5% of the principal workforce in the 2020-2021 school year (Taie & Lewis, 2022). This statistic reflects a slight decline over the past few decades. Black principals were 11% of the principal workforce in 2003-2004 and 10% of the principal workforce in 2011-2012 (United States Department of Education, 2016). Similarly, a recent survey from the School Superintendents Association (formerly known as AASA) revealed that Black superintendents represent about 3.85% of the U.S. public education workforce (Thomas et al., 2023). This survey captured the demographics, salaries, and employment agreements of approximately 2,400 superintendents nationwide in 2022. Most of these Black leaders work in districts serving fewer than 5,000 students. 36% of Black superintendents work in suburban areas, 31% in urban areas, and 30% in rural school contexts. In the survey, 54% of Black superintendents had been in their roles for 1 to 5 years. Further, these leaders are increasingly likely to have performance clauses and buyout provisions in their contracts (Thomas et al., 2023).

Research highlights three primary reasons for the turbulence and underrepresentation of the Black education leadership workforce. First, Black leaders, like Black classroom teachers, often navigate anti-Black (and intersectional) oppressive school conditions that maintain social suffering, undermine their leadership, and ultimately cause them to contemplate leaving their positions (Stanley, 2025). Additionally, educational leadership preparation programs pose barriers, including exclusive admissions policies and a lack of culturally responsive curricula (Perrone, 2022; Weiner et al., 2021). Moreover, aspiring Black education leaders experience fewer opportunities for promotion due to exclusive practices like same-race tapping (e.g., white administrators are more likely to tap other white aspiring administrators) (Berry & Reardon, 2022). In short, Black educational leaders are severely underrepresented in the broader education workforce, are forced to navigate racially hostile school environments, experience shorter tenures, and may be more susceptible to stricter accountability standards and harsher penalties within state and district education systems.

Unpacking the Local Conditions: Navigating State-Sanctioned Racialized Hostility

At a local level, Black leaders are disproportionately working in resource-constrained and intentionally destabilized environments and face numerous racialized assaults that can shorten their tenures (Stanley, 2024). Most Black principals work in urban contexts with high rates of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch (Taie & Lewis, 2022). Due to state neglect and gentrification, these areas experience lower tax revenues

and a loss of essential resources, hindering Black school leaders' ability to support their students. As a result, they frequently depend on threatened federal funding sources, such as Title I dollars. Saliently, Black leaders remain vulnerable to intense backlash against their leadership visions. I list a few recent examples below:

- In 2021, Principal James Whitfield (Texas) was put on administrative leave and accused of "teaching Critical Race Theory" after sending an email that called out systemic racism in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd[1].
- In 2022, after a litany of threats and offenses culminating in racist and sexist graffiti, Vice Principal Elysse Versher resigned from Sacramento City Unified Schools[2].
- In 2022, Mauri Friestleben, a Black woman principal of a predominantly Black high school in Minneapolis was put on administrative leave (has since been reinstated) for violating district protocol when she supported a student walkout in protest of the police murder of Amir Locke[3].
- In 2024, Rainey Briggs, Superintendent of Baraboo Schools in Wisconsin, was shoved by a white parent during a graduation ceremony while he was trying to congratulate their child as they walked across the stage[4].

These events offer a glimpse into the interior lives of Black educational leaders nationwide, exposing the public antagonism and contempt that many communities harbor toward Black leadership. Moreover, these events demonstrate that representational diversity in the educational leader workforce is a necessary yet insufficient goal; schools and districts must commit to changing the conditions that produce the backlash against Black leadership, especially when they are trying to lead Black communities from an emancipatory standpoint.

Reconnecting with Dislodged Ancestral Knowledges: Restoring Black Educational Pursuits

> "When the principal leader had completed the administrative tasks of running a school, such as establishing procedures, planning school routines, and hiring, observing, and evaluating teachers, his work as advocate for Black children was just beginning"(Siddle Walker & Byas, 2003, p.71).

In what follows, and against the backdrop of the attacks from a right-wing extremist administration, I offer contemporary Black education leaders a way to reconnect with Black ancestral knowledge as a path to navigating and imagining more liberatory Black education futures. I picture Black principals and superintendents who were organized and ardently focused on preparing Black youth for worlds that did not yet exist (Siddle Walker, 1996). I think of the Black women bridge leaders like Mary McLeod Bethune, who focused on community uplift as the central component of leadership praxis and a means to interrupting hierarchies of oppression (Douglass Horsford, 2012). I also think of the hidden provocateurs who worked within and across oppressive educational systems and boundaries to help Black students reach their highest potential (Siddle Walker, 2018). These *hidden provocateurs* leaned on West African Trickster logic, "artful and adroit accommodation of his manners and methods to what he knows to be the weaknesses and foibles of his white neighbor. Knowing what is expected of him and knowing too what he himself wants, the Negro craftily uses his knowledge to anticipate opposition and to eliminate friction in securing his desires" (Moton, 1942, p.27; Siddle Walker, 2018). Scholarship reveals that some contemporary Black leaders carry these traditions into schools and districts (see Aaron, 2020; Green, 2015; Joseph & Shockley, 2021; Khalifa, 2018; Lomotey, 2022). Arguably, the socio-political conditions in front of us (e.g., anti-woke, attacks on DEI, erasure of Black histories) will require Black education leaders to lean on similar logic and practices to defend and protect the futures of Black educational communities.

1 See https://www.texastribune.org/2021/09/18/colleyville-principal-critical-race-theory/

2 See https://www.capradio.org/articles/2022/07/06/african-american-school-administrators-in-sacramento-say-racism-against-black-leaders-is-an-ongoing-issue/

3 See https://spokesman-recorder.com/2022/05/23/mauri-friestleben-reinstated-as-principal-at-north-high-school/

4 See https://www.wdam.com/2024/06/14/school-superintendent-speaks-out-after-father-pushes-him-over-shaking-daughters-hand/

Finding and Developing Hidden Provocateurs: Centering the Emancipatory Potential of SCALE

To improve the conditions and ensure more liberatory futures for Black educational communities, we need Black leaders who are (re)connected to the emancipatory imaginations lodged in Black educational histories. Dr. Sonya Douglass offers SCALE to make those leadership legacies and ancestral knowledges more legible/recognizable to contemporary leaders of Black educational communities (see Figure 1). Douglass explains that "SCALE represents a shift from the rhetoric of diversity, equity, and inclusion towards an emancipatory vision of education leaders" (Walrond, 2022, p. 88). SCALE is an acronym that draws on African knowledge systems and stands for self-knowledge, culture, agency, liberation, ethics/values. This framework suggests that for education systems to meet the needs of Black educational communities, they must be corrective and committed to Black ways of knowing and being. As such, SCALE offers a way to (re)connect Black education leaders to their ancestral roots through self-knowledge and Sankofa, or the (re)membering of Black histories to guide current and future leadership practice.

Recommendations

I recommend that educational decision-makers leverage SCALE to rethink leadership preparation and professional development and design networked communities. Within these spaces, and in response to the BERC COVID-19 study (Douglass Horsford et al., 2021) recommendations, Black education leaders must leverage the logic and practices of past, hidden provocateurs to resist being perceived as agents of the state. Specifically, within a national and state "anti-woke" socio-political climate, Black education leaders should work collectively to transgress and undermine oppressive educational systems and lead in ways that refuse anti-Blackness. The future of Black educational leadership practice, preparation, and professional development should center on the following priorities:

- Be recognizable and answerable to Black educational communities
- Be uncompromisable; leaders cannot obey the colonial, repressive logic of the state
- Be tied to freedom, nation-building, and self-reliance
- Be committed to the wellness and sustainability of self and Black educational communities

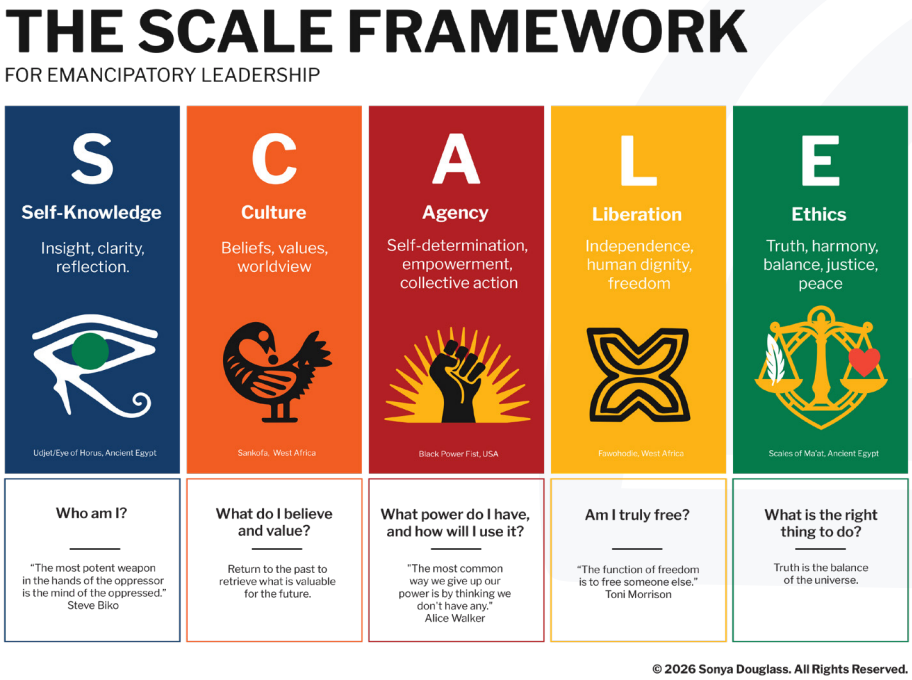


Figure 1 The SCALE Framework for Emancipatory Educational Leadership

Black Educational Leaders: I recommend Black leaders develop and sustain networked, cross-boundary solidarities comprised of liberation-minded Black educators, school, district, and community leaders, which provide the space to heal from racialized trauma and co-imagine possibilities for the future. I recommend that Black leadership networked communities use SCALE to supplement existing professional development opportunities and develop future hidden provocateurs to infiltrate teacher leadership, the principalship, the superintendency, school board membership, and other policy-making spaces.

Educator Preparation: Local colleges and schools of education should center SCALE as a framework to design leadership preparation programs and leverage state resources to build more intentional Black leadership pipelines. Centering these perspectives will create inviting environments to nourish the future of Black leaders.

School Boards and Policymakers: School boards and policymakers must design policies and practices that center and create the space for emancipatory Black leadership visions.

Researchers: Future research should more intentionally examine the ways that Black educational leaders navigate anti-Black school and district conditions to defend Black educational communities.

Like the hidden provocateurs of past generations, contemporary Black education leaders will need to organize as an act of independence and self-reliance to help secure and sustain more liberatory Black education futures.

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About the Author



Darrius Stanley, Ph.D., is a proud father, husband, son, brother and friend to his community. He serves as an associate professor of educational leadership and policy at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities He is also a graduate of the prestigious Florida A&M University, his hometown HBCU. His work centers on the political, educational, and philosophical perspectives of Black people to unearth Black genius and possibility in education. He intends to explore and uplift Black people's communal ways of knowing and existing in education, in hopes of envisioning a path to educational liberation. His scholarship sits at the intersection(s) of Black education, Black educators, and educational leadership. He leverages historical, community-based, and intersectional qualitative methodologies to better understand the experiences of Black educators in K-12 educational spaces. Further, his work builds on the rich legacy of Black educators as community educators to imagine and conceptualize community-engaged educational leadership praxis. Dr. Stanley serves as a research fellow for the Black Education Research Center.

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