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# Mixed Messages and Diversity Management: Misalignment between District Intention and Action Aimed at Hiring Teachers of Color

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**Purpose:** As senior district leaders in US public schools make public statements about the importance of teachers of color for all students, their inaction in designing policies to recruit these educators can undermine diversity progress. This study explores the mixed messaging around one small urban district's effort to increase the ethnoracial diversity of its teacher workforce in response to its increasingly diverse student body. **Research Methods/Approach:** We draw on semistructured interviews across a purposive sample ( $n = 41$ ) that included staff members, the superintendent, central and school-site administrators, and teachers in one small northeastern urban school district. **Findings:** We found that the superintendent's supportive messaging about teacher diversity coupled with his decision to curtail diversity efforts sent mixed messages to district educators about the importance of recruiting teachers of color. These decisions stymied diversity progress across the organization and characterized what we term "mixed-message diversity management." **Implications:** This article contributes to empirical literature on diversity hiring in US public education by examining the strategic efforts of district and school leaders toward diversifying their teaching force and how these efforts succeed or fail to build consensus and buy-in among educators. Where the best intentions of district and school leaders have failed to make substantive inroads into increased teacher diversity, more deliberate policy efforts to mitigate the personal biases of decision makers may be required. The practice of leadership—whether at the school or district level—demands an awareness of bias, especially unconscious bias, and an openness to critical self-examination and organizational risk-taking.

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In April 2021, announcing US president Joe Biden's American Families Plan, the White House highlighted the importance of recruiting teachers of color as one policy lever to improve learning outcomes for students of color: "while teachers of color can have a particularly strong impact on students of color, around one in five teachers are people of color, compared to more than half of K–12 public school students" (White House 2021). These messages mirror those of district leaders who underscore the urgency of recruiting teachers of color in response to the rising percentage of students of color in US public schools (Bristol 2020; Gist et al. 2021). Teacher diversity efforts from district leaders underscore the salient qualities and skills that teachers of color bring to improving the learning and social and emotional development of all students, particularly students of color (Singh 2022; White et al. 2022). However, the slow pace at which districts hire teachers of color does not reflect the espoused rhetoric that district, school, and political leaders share about these teachers' added value (Davis 2020). Ultimately, we believe that the paradoxical nature of the projected value of an ethnoracially diverse teacher workforce, when considering the slow pace of hiring teachers of color, speaks to the contradictory messaging and implementation of diversity efforts by school leaders in US public schools.

Researchers have framed teachers of color not only as being connected to diverse students through representation but also as more likely to enact social justice-oriented pedagogy when compared with their White peers (Carter Andrews et al. 2019). Other research points to the capacity of teachers of color to increase a school's commitment to embody organizational values around racial diversity (Bower-Phipps et al. 2013). In response to disparities in behavioral and learning outcomes for students of color, some teachers of color have employed their multicultural knowledge to mitigate inequality in their schooling experiences (Lindsay and Hart 2017; Turner 2015). Moreover, students of color have improved academic and social and emotional outcomes when taught by teachers

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of color as compared with White teachers (Easton-Brooks 2019), which underscores the importance of increasing and retaining teachers of color at all schools but particularly those with an ethnoracially diverse student body. For example, one quasi-experimental study found that when Asian American, Black, and Latinx students were assigned to a demographically matched teacher, they were less likely to be suspended compared with the likelihood of suspension when assigned to a White teacher (Shirrell et al. 2023).

Although an extensive body of research has demonstrated how teachers of color improve students' learning outcomes, districts struggle to both hire and retain teachers of color. District leaders posit that professional development (PD) on cultural awareness can be one important lever to retain teachers of color (Diem et al. 2016). These opportunities go above supplementing the cultural competency of teachers of color and promote benefits of affinity spaces, like networking and an increased sense of belongingness (Gist 2018). Well-designed and culturally aware PD is consistent with the idea that powerful professional learning is shaped, in part, by its alignment with teachers' professional identity (Bristol et al. 2020; Goings et al. 2018; Noonan 2019). Moreover, teachers of color bring into their schools and classrooms the cultural competency learned from their PD sessions alongside their funds of knowledge; researchers have characterized the cultural competency possessed by teachers of color as an asset to responding to changes in student body demographics (Diem et al. 2016).

In this study, we explore the mixed messaging around one small urban district's effort to increase the ethnoracial diversity of its teacher workforce in response to its increasingly diverse student body. Rockridge Public Schools (RPS; pseudonym), located in the northeastern United States, has experienced a recent ethnoracial demographic shift in its student body, which mirrors larger trends of increasing numbers of students of color in the region's public schools (Irons 2019). Thus, we examine how RPS's district and school leaders described the role of recruiting an ethnoracially diverse workforce as well as how the decisions enacted by these leaders affected the organizational climate of RPS's teacher workforce.

Moreover, we analyze RPS district and school leaders' inaction around designing and implementing formal organization-wide policies, practices, and initiatives aimed at recruiting and retaining teachers of color, what we term "mixed-message diversity management." This qualitative study examines district and school leaders' handling of diversity management; the leaders in our study, in particular the district's superintendent, message the importance of hiring teachers of color, but they limit diversity efforts to the secondary level. We found that district leaders gave mixed messages on diversity management, which stymied diversity progress (Ayscue 2016; Brezicha and Hopkins 2016). These paradoxical actions can be a barrier to addressing the shortage of teachers of color.

## Conceptual Framework

In policy studies (Henry 2021; Lu and Williams 2023), researchers examine why espoused beliefs about diversity, equity, and inclusion do not translate into substantive changes both outside and inside of organizations. Here, we draw on two frameworks—problem definition (Rochefort and Cobb 1994) and a socio-ecological examination of workplace diversity (Bond and Haynes 2014)—to explore how mixed messaging around diversity is operationalized in one school district’s attempt to diversify its educator workforce. These two frameworks elucidate potential mechanisms that undermine the rhetoric around hiring teachers of color. For example, Rochefort and Cobb (1994) draw attention to how one’s social status shapes social policy responses outside of the organization; Bond and Haynes (2014) apply a socio-ecological approach to contextualizing the dynamics that influence workplace diversity inside organizations. Understanding how leaders define problems that require policy interventions as well as the social status of the target population requiring intervention can influence policy design and intervention (Cook 1979; Kluegel and Smith 2017).

A particular focus of this study is the impact of diversity mixed messages, which describes the misalignment that manifests when leaders promote messaging to stakeholders that diversity is valued, often through a diversity statement or a strategic plan, while also maintaining ambiguous hiring practices or a poor diversity climate (Avery and Johnson 2008; Harris et al. 2010). Diversity mixed messages have also been conceptualized as “lip service,” such that the actions and culture promoted by organizational leaders are often not consistent with diversity goals (Hoobler 2005). Thus, the emphasis of diversity mixed messaging on district-wide initiatives is imperative to understand how hiring decisions can be a barrier for school districts looking to recruit teachers of color, particularly for those districts with outward-facing diversity efforts (Mattheis 2017).

## Problem Definitions

Rochefort and Cobb (1994) conceptualize “problem definition” to describe how policy makers’ messaging about a problem to the public and the public’s perception of the problem can influence the degree to which the problem is addressed. Problem definition, then, can inform the contradiction between school leaders’ advocacy for hiring teachers of color and the low percentages of teachers of color hired. Rochefort and Cobb identify several dimensions that explain why and how espoused beliefs do not manifest into changes in the areas that leaders present as problematic.

One key dimension, according to Rochefort and Cobb (1994), around whether meaningful policies are designed and enacted is problem causation. Are

the problems in question caused by structural or individual factors? For example, a structural explanation for the low percentage of Black teachers in schools might be, according to research, racial bias in the hiring process (D'amico et al. 2017). An individual explanation could be that Black college graduates choose more well-compensated professions, which exclude teaching (Cormier et al. 2021; Madkins 2011). Rochefort and Cobb (1994) note that problem causation seeking structural or individual determinants is often associated with the “underclass problem” (63), or individuals from historically marginalized communities. Moreover, policies, they argue, that are defined as structural lead to prescriptions focused on creating standards to remediate the problem. Although Rochefort and Cobb do not address policy responses that view individuals as the problem, more recent research highlights that the prescription has been to pathologize groups, especially people of color (Carey et al. 2022; Wallace 2023). As a result, no material change addresses the problem.

A second dimension that Rochefort and Cobb (1994) identify as limiting the degree to which policy prescriptions are created is the “characteristics of the problem population” (62). Social policy making requires the shifting of scarce resources, real or imagined. As such, beliefs about the demographic characteristics of the target population can shape policy design. Attitudes and dispositions from members of the public and organizations who have power about whether the problem population is worthy or unworthy, deserving or undeserving, influence the degree to which problems are earnestly addressed. For Rochefort and Cobb, the groups that are pushed to society’s margins, such as the working poor, are often viewed as the most unworthy or undeserving of social policy remediation. Rochefort and Cobb do not explicitly name how belonging to a particular ethnoracial group can influence policy makers and the public’s views around policy designs. However, they do describe how one’s group status within the larger social hierarchy enables or constrains a policy response. For groups whose social status in the hierarchy renders them the “underclass” (63) or as “unworthy, undeserving, strange, and threatening” (66), social policy prescriptions have rarely been designed to remediate their problems.

### Socio-ecological Framework for Workplace Diversity

Whereas Rochefort and Cobb (1994) draw attention to how one’s social status shapes social policy responses outside organizations, Bond and Haynes (2014) apply a socio-ecological approach to contextualizing the systemic dynamics that influence workplace diversity inside organizations. They posit that because organizations are nested within society, they reproduce the socialized hierarchies present in society. For example, researchers draw attention to systemic barriers—for example, “the glass ceiling” or “the sticky floor”—as discriminatory trends

that isolate members of historically marginalized communities (i.e., women and people of color) from organizational advancement (Cotter et al. 2001). The persistence of these patterns can be attributed to the unchecked influence of stereotypical biases held by managers, which are enabled by subjectivity in evaluative criteria for advancement (Marques 2010). Workers from historically marginalized communities must also combat stereotype activation and stereotype threat (Ray 2019). Furthermore, organizations tend to maintain their homogeneity due to in-group favoritism bias (Noonan and Bristol 2020), in that organizations tend to attract and hire applicants like those in their existing workforce (Grissom and Keiser 2011). Taken together, these biases constrain the success of workers of color by creating a hostile organizational context that exacerbates isolation, specifically for teachers of color (Kohli et al. 2021).

The second component of Bond and Haynes's (2014) framework examines how subtle forms of prejudice and discrimination play a role in both perceptions of diversity management and the experiences of underrepresented groups. People of color working in predominantly White organizations are often targets of macro- and microaggressions and receive insufficient support from leadership or human resources for creating organizational change (Sue 2010). These feelings of being aggressed intensify when people of color belong to multiple marginalized groups and their colleagues self-identify with historically privileged groups (e.g., veteran White male teacher vs. novice Black female teacher). These intersecting marginalized and privileged identities between workers have, as Bond and Haynes argue, the potential to create "diversity fault lines" in an organization. If left unattended by senior leaders in the organization, diversity fault lines can impede diversity efforts through competitive and conflicting intergroup conflict that devalues collective efficacy.

A third ecological perspective includes the quality of the diversity climate, as measured by how the organization communicates, prioritizes, and executes diversity efforts (Bond and Haynes 2014). First, organizations seeking to create positive working conditions for ethnoracially diverse workers identify diversity values that are salient to targeted populations. Next, managers develop organizational practices that demand inclusion and equity as well as promote empathy or an "ethos of connection" so that all workers can begin to hold themselves accountable for positive diversity goal efforts. Bond and Haynes's (2014) social-ecological framework for workplace diversity outlines crucial considerations for promoting a strong diversity climate. Our study explored employee perceptions of the organization's diversity climate. Workforce perceptions of diversity efforts not only indicate organizational culture but also have long-term effects on how likely it is diversity efforts will be genuinely internalized.

To this end, there is a gap in the literature on how a district's educator diversity climate and district leaders' messages shape hiring practices. Trends in recent literature have focused on the benefits and organizational experiences of teachers

of color serving students of color (Easton-Brooks 2019). However, less research has explored educators' perceptions of district-based practices and strategies to diversify a teacher workforce ethnoracially. Understanding these perceptions—and their relationship to district and school messaging—is critical because they represent an often invisible but potent barrier to teacher diversity. Thus, we seek to fill the empirical gap on diversity mixed messaging by exploring the following research questions:

1. What messages do RPS's senior district and school leaders communicate about hiring teachers of color?
2. What are teachers' perceptions of RPS's diversity messages?

## Methods

Using semistructured interviews across a purposive sample varying across ethnographic identities and roles (Galletta 2013), we sought to understand how messaging about teacher diversity shapes the perceptions of hiring managers and teachers related to hiring—and hiring teachers of color specifically. This article draws on data from a larger study that explored adults' and students' perceptions of teacher diversity as well as the school-based experiences of teachers of color.

### *Rockridge Public Schools*

RPS is a small urban school district located in the northeastern United States. Its 10 schools—1 high school, 2 middle schools, 6 elementary schools, and 1 dual-language K–8 school—serve 6,000 students and employ 500 educators. Six of the 10 schools receive Title I federal funding. In 2018, the year of data collection, the city of Rockridge was predominately White (68%). Latinos accounted for 13% of the population, and Asians and African Americans accounted for 12% and 7%, respectively.

The district was an optimal setting for studying teacher diversity hiring practices because the then-superintendent, hired 3 years earlier and new to the community, had made equity a centerpiece of his “master plan” and often publicly spoke of the importance of increasing the percentage of teachers of color, given demographic shifts in student population (see table 1). It is also important to note that in 2000, Black and Latinx students comprised 10% and 17.5% of the student body, and in 2010, they comprised 10% and 29%, respectively, of the student body. The Latinx student body increased from 14.5% in 1995 to 39.6% in 2017—a 173% increase across 22 years. Whereas 40% of students self-identified as persons of color, only 7% of RPS's teachers did. Of the teachers and students

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TABLE 1

*Student Ethnoracial Demographics in Rockridge Public Schools 2013–18*

	2013–14 (%)	2014–15 (%)	2015–16 (%)	2016–17 (%)	2017–18 (%)
African American	9.6	9.4	10	10	9.6
Asian	5.9	5.5	5.5	5.7	5.6
Latinx	33.5	35	36	37	40
Native American	.2	.2	.1	.1	.1
Native Hawaiian	.2	.1	.1	.1	.1
Multiracial, Non-Hispanic	2.7	2.4	2.7	2.7	2.4
White	48.0	47.0	45.0	44.0	43.0

of color, a majority self-identified as Latinx: roughly 4% of the teachers and 20% of the students. The district, like many districts with an ethnoracially diverse student body, disproportionately suspended students of color when compared with their peers. During the 2017–18 school year, 4% of Black students and 3% of Latinx students had at least one out-of-school suspension, compared with 1% of White students. Although the district does not keep records on the ethnoracial identity of its district leaders, all but two district leaders interviewed for this study—including the superintendent—self-identified as White (see table 2).

Rockridge assigns students to schools based on residential boundaries. Given historical housing segregation and income disparity, the district’s White residents and residents of color are clustered in different sections across the city. These patterns of housing segregation are replicated in the schools: for example, Eisenhower Elementary (pseudonym) has 40% students of color, whereas at Gershwin Elementary (also a pseudonym), students of color account for 80% of the population.

*Data Collection and Analysis*

We conducted one round of semistructured interviews with a cross section of district and school-based members during the 2017–18 academic year. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. To understand the degree to which RPS’s teacher diversity hiring policies aligned with the district’s hiring practices, members of the research team interviewed district leadership to identify school sites and key district administrators involved in hiring. Of the district’s ten schools, we recruited administrators, teachers, and staff from four: the only high school, one of two middle schools, and two of seven elementary schools. Using a



TABLE 2

*Demographics and Role Descriptions of Analytic Sample (n = 41)*

	DISTRICT LEADER	SCHOOL LEADER	TEACHER/ STAFF	SAMPLE POP.
	(n)	(n)	(n)	(n)
School level:				
Elementary	0	3	5	8
Middle	0	1	5	6
High	0	6	16	22
Race/ethnicity:				
White	6	10	14	25
Biracial	0	0	1	1
Asian/Pacific Islander	0	0	4	4
Latinx	0	2	6	8
Black	2	0	1	3
Total	5	10	26	36

district-generated spreadsheet of all employees that included ethnoracial identity, researchers sent individual invitations to key staff involved in hiring at the district and school levels, all teachers and staff of color in the target schools, and a random sample of White teachers and staff in the target schools. Regarding ethnoracial identity, researchers asked participants to self-identify as part of their interview. When there was a discrepancy between district records and participants' ethnoracial self-identification, we deferred to participants. To capture a diversity of views across roles and ethnoracial identity, we employed a purposive sample (Patton 1990) for participants' district roles ( $n = 36$ ): 6 district leaders including the superintendent, 10 school-level administrators, and 26 teachers and school staff. Of the total sample (see table 2), 25 participants self-identified as White and 16 as persons of color. It is important to note that we oversampled for participants of color. Given that educators of color were a relatively small minority of the district's workforce, we thought it is important to include larger numbers of these educators to develop a more thorough understanding of the district's diversity climate.

The research team conducted multiple rounds of inductive coding and calibrated codes across readers (Saldaña 2014). We then identified several key themes and patterns within and across individual cases. These themes included beliefs about hiring in the district and the organizational dynamics that enabled and constrained hiring teachers of color. Further research memos explored this theme in depth, and we returned to the data to confirm or disconfirm emerging hypotheses.

*Positionality*

We are a diverse research team: the first author is a Black man and former high school teacher; the second author is a Black and Latina biracial woman and graduate student in education; the third author is a White man and former educator with community-based organizations. Before we began data collection, we talked about the range of our racialized and gendered school-based experiences and interactions with colleagues and subsequent subjectivity (Dillard 2000). As such, we employed bracketing (Tufford and Newman 2010), or setting aside our assumptions to center the experiences of study participants. By doing so and becoming aware of our social location, or reflexivity (Hopkins 1989), we could focus on what participants said. Moreover, we drafted preliminary possibilities about participants' school-based experiences using contact summary forms (Miles and Huberman 1994); we revised them as we collected more data. Each researcher independently read the participants' transcripts and engaged in textual reflective practice (Macbeth 2001) to prepare a draft of the findings.

Findings

We found that senior district leaders at RPS messaged the importance of increasing the ethnoracial diversity of its teacher workforce in response to changing student demographics. District leaders—namely the superintendent—made public statements about how teachers of color benefited students of color. The superintendent defined the problem as a structural one in which a predominately White teacher workforce had a negative impact on students of color, the district's most marginalized group. As discussed below, the decision to describe or prioritize policy prescriptions for the district's most marginalized students (i.e., students of color) decreased the likelihood of making any meaningful shifts to enact substantive shifts in the district. RPS's superintendent did move beyond rhetoric. For example, he acknowledged that the part-time White retiree who served as the lone district recruitment officer could not carry out his vision of diversifying the educator workforce and budgeted for a full-time human resources officer. In addition, he supported the creation of an Equity Committee at the high school; among the committee's tasks was recruiting more teachers of color into the district. However, we also observed that the superintendent's decision to curtail the Equity Committee's focus on district-wide diversity recruitment, despite success at the high school, sent mixed messages to educators across the district about the importance of diversifying the educator workforce. This decision stymied diversity progress and characterized what we termed mixed-message diversity management.

*Messaging from the Superintendent Toward Ethnoracial Diversity Hiring*

The most prominent signaling around hiring teachers of color was from the RPS superintendent, who set the district's policy agenda to be more responsive to the increasingly ethnoracially diverse student body. In addition to making public comments in the local media, the superintendent defined the urgency of hiring teachers of color this way:

There are educational benefits to having a diverse staff. . . . It makes for a stronger team. The sort of marketplace of ideas improves when you've got different perspectives. And people see the world in different ways, and it is my core belief that there has to be—as a result, needs to be something that Rockridge schools focus on. It's good for our kids to see their faces reflected in the staff and know that there are things that they can aspire to become; educators become leaders within Rockridge schools, become superintendents, principals here in Rockridge and beyond.

Here, the superintendent emphasized that one of his core values was increasing the ethnoracial diversity of the teacher workforce when making hiring decisions in service of district students—namely students of color.

In addition to prioritizing the hiring of teachers of color in public statements and district policy documents, the superintendent asserted that he messaged these priorities in his relationships with school leaders:

I have very direct conversations with [building administrators] about what the strategy is to ensure they have hires that represent diversity. . . . I asked [a district-level administrator] to put together a task force, chosen in a diverse group of folks from the district to make some recommendations to improve, over the next few years, proven selection of different candidates. I think that led to some improvements last year, but it's not a long-term strategy. . . . And I have very direct conversations with them about what the strategy is to ensure they have hires that represent diversity.

As the superintendent noted, some incremental progress was made to increase the ethnoracial diversity of the district's educator workforce compared with previous hiring patterns in the district. The superintendent believed that a primary influence on the district's diversity hiring progress was his clear communication, or messaging, about the importance of educators of color. However, he also noted that the messaging alone would not suffice without structural changes or policy interventions.

Some teachers agreed that the superintendent's messaging toward hiring a more ethnoracially diverse workforce was making incremental progress in the district. One White high school teacher appeared optimistic that the change in

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leadership had instigated actionable steps toward diversifying the teaching workforce: “So we’ve been trying to talk about teacher diversity, and we have a new superintendent, and he talks a lot about this idea of ‘One Rockridge,’ which is great.” Beyond talk, some teachers also heard messaging about educator diversity that changed their mindsets. One recently hired RPS teacher, an Asian American high school teacher, underscored how conversations with a school administrator shifted his beliefs about the importance of an ethnoracially diverse educator workforce: “My department head told me that it is important to me to hire teachers of color because when ‘the kids see these teachers they say that everybody is accepted in the school.’ That sentence from her stands out even today and I still remember that. So, I do think that [the district] does validate that we need to have different races even in teachers who are hired.”

It is important to note that across our study, which included educators from all grade levels in the district, it was predominantly high school teachers who described the district’s commitment to an ethnoracially diverse teacher workforce. One primary reason why such conversations occurred was the presence of the high school’s Equity Committee that had been established by the principal to promote equitable hiring policies. Thus, it was possible that the high school teachers were aware of or exposed to conversations about teacher diversity.

### *Collectivized Educator Efforts to Increase Diversity*

The most notable effort to diversify RPS’s educator workforce was through the creation of the Equity Committee at the high school, a group of teachers and building administrators whose tasks included hiring more teachers of color. District leaders spoke favorably about the critical role the Equity Committee played in furthering the superintendent’s teacher diversity messaging. Study participants, who were also members of the Equity Committee, spoke favorably about their efforts to support the superintendent’s priorities to diversify the educator workforce. In response to the RPS superintendent’s messaging about diversity, the high school principal, a White man, included a focus on hiring teachers of color as one of the Equity Committee’s charges.

We are looking for more diversity now to reflect the makeup of our school because we are 41% White [students] now, though our staff is like ninety-three or more percent White, so that’s something we need to pay attention to, which, since I started in this district, that’s something that the superintendent, whoever that was, would say we need to pay attention to diversity, but no one really ever did. A big step forward was having the equity team be part of the hiring process because that has put it squarely on the directors who know someone is looking over their shoulder, not in a negative way, but we got to pay attention to it, so it’s made a difference.

Here, the high school principal acknowledged that, under the current superintendent, the organizational climate supported increasing the ethnoracial diversity of the district's workforce. Consequently, he felt empowered to make structural changes by including members of the Equity Committee to monitor or "look over the [hiring personnel's] shoulder." In so doing, the high school principal believed these structural changes "made a difference" in increasing the number of teachers of color in his building.

Educators at the high school agreed that the principal's support of and decision to utilize the Equity Committee to focus on diversifying the workforce proved beneficial. Specifically, this high school administrator and Equity Committee cofounder, who was a person of color, was encouraged that the high school principal leveraged the group's expertise by creating an open-door policy to discuss efforts to diversify high school staff: "We felt so comfortable. . . . He [the high school principal] would welcome us in and say, 'Yes, let's talk about this.' And so, he has allowed us to move forward with this equity issue. And it's gone in terms of hiring, attending job fairs, and it is the first time, really, that ever happened, so it was very good."

Like the Equity Committee cofounder, participants in our study, especially at the high school, described an organizational climate (Bond and Haynes 2014) within RPS in which the high school principal prioritized diversity efforts. Moreover, a select group of educators at the high school recounted how the principal enabled the Equity Committee to make organizational changes. As a guidance counselor—also a person of color—at the high school noted, "My principal put a caveat into place at the end of last year that any hires that he was responsible for, he would allocate one person, at least one person from the equity team be a member of the interview committee. And I think that that's an important piece of work." Educators across the high school were aware that the shift in the principal's approach to the hiring process bolstered efforts to increase teachers of color.

Participants were also aware of the organizational climate's constraints to support increasing teachers of color before the structural shifts in the hiring committee. A founding member of the Equity Committee recounted the district's old high school hiring process and the changes urged by the group in this way: "People apply to a position. . . . Someone in the central office reads the candidates to be interviewed, then the director, superintendent, assistant superintendent calls together a group of adults to interview the candidate, maybe it is just two or three people. [Members of Equity Committee] made a point of saying, 'We want to be part of that process, because up to now there has never been a person of color in the process. There needs to be a person of color in the process.' So, we spoke to the superintendent, and he was great about it."

Here, the staff member discussed how the superintendent saw the importance of including a person of color in the hiring process. Not only did he support the

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aims of the Equity Committee, which was composed of both teachers of color and White teachers and staff, but he also supported having a person of color on the hiring committee.

The superintendent was supportive of the Equity Committee's recommendation to include one of its members on the high school hiring committee. According to one White teacher, this decision led to seeming progress: "Compared to when I started working here, at least I wasn't aware of any initiatives. But I know last year specifically, they're requiring that one member from the Equity Committee be at interviews. And I know that they've hired a couple teachers of color compared to the years past." This teacher's claim about the Equity Committee's role in shaping the organizational climate at the high school appeared to lead to hiring teachers of color in the subsequent academic year. In our sample, four of the six novice teachers of color were hired at the high school, signaling diversity progress or prioritization (Choi and Rainey 2014).

However, this progress at the high school level to diversify the teacher workforce was not replicated at the middle or elementary schools. Due to this inertia in hiring outside of the high school, many educators across RPS questioned what they believed to be mixed messaging by senior district leaders. They were frustrated that change in teacher diversity seemed evident only in the high school. This was partly due to the existence of the Equity Committee, which influenced hiring at the high school. In many ways, the absence of an Equity Committee (or an Equity Committee-like structure) in other schools that could provide input to other school-based hiring committees undermined the superintendent's messages about recruiting teachers of color district-wide.

### *Diversity Mixed Messaging and Diversity Management*

As described above, members of RPS messaged the importance of increasing the representation of teachers of color in the district. Why, then, was RPS unable to make progress in diversifying its educator workforce at the middle and elementary levels? We argue that the problem description (Rocheffort and Cobb 1994), or the focus on remediating the experiences of the district's most marginalized students, facilitated the inaction around designing and implementing formal district-wide policies, practices, and initiatives aimed at recruiting and retaining teachers of color. Among our participants, the problem of a small percentage of teachers of color was framed as being of greatest concern for Rockridge's students of color and not for the 60% of White students.

From the district's most senior leader (i.e., the superintendent) to building leaders and teachers, there seemed to be a common belief that policy efforts to diversify the teacher workforce mattered because they would benefit students of color primarily. However, as Rocheffort and Cobb (1994) note, policies that aim

to ameliorate the experiences of society's most marginalized—that is, “the underclass” (63)—rarely lead to subsequent change. Indeed, at the high school, there was clear evidence of how the district's management of diversity, in supporting the establishment of an Equity Committee and requiring that at least one member of the committee participate in hiring decisions, led to modest increases in the number of newly hired teachers of color. However, the superintendent's inability to make structural recommendations (e.g., establishing a school-wide Equity Committee that would participate in hiring decisions), at the least, to the other nine schools in the district constrained RPS's progress to diversify its workforce. It is important to acknowledge that the superintendent was not explicit with either the RPS community or the research team about why his efforts to increase the number of teachers of color in the district stopped at messaging its importance. Might there have been political pressure to implement teacher diversity efforts more gradually? Might the superintendent have wanted to decentralize and grant individual schools more autonomy in the hiring process? What is clear, however, is that these structural changes, leading to the recruitment of more high school teachers of color in service of the district's most marginalized students (i.e., students of color), did not extend to other schools in the district.

The superintendent believed that central office policy efforts aimed at diversifying the district's educator workforce would trickle down and change mindsets among RPS principals and assistant principals. When asked how he supported principals to enact policies and practices to diversify the educator workforce, the superintendent responded, “Reminding them [principals] about the critical nature of selecting candidates that contribute to the diversity of the system, reminding them of the strategic priority and goal that we have and our strategic plan around this [teacher diversity].” The superintendent's hope that merely messaging the importance of an ethnoracially diverse teacher workforce would lead to structural changes in the hiring process proved to be an ineffective strategy.

Despite apparent consensus among our participants on the value of teacher ethnoracial diversity, only one of the four principals we interviewed characterized diversity within the workforce as valuable to other teachers or to the school climate at large (as opposed to benefiting students of color). One district administrator expressed criticism about the district's diversity progress: “I think it's a photo op instead of a real desire . . . because there could have been a lot more done if only the interest was there.” Moreover, three of the four school leaders had little to no awareness of the superintendent's diversity management approach, nor did they have plans to prioritize such policies in their own schools. In fact, this principal was critical of recent actions: “Well, I mean, we have had no real commitment to it. I mean we say we want to do it, but if you really want to hire diverse teachers, you've got to find a way to make that happen. I mean,

going to some college fairs in March and posting on your website is likely to produce results like we already have.” This administrator did not buy into the superintendent’s policy. In fact, he actively decided not to even engage in recruiting activities such as college fairs because he thought they were futile.

Like school administrators, some RPS teachers perceived the superintendent’s diversity management as weak or “lip service” (Hoobler 2005). They felt the superintendent merely signaled that recruiting and retaining teachers of color were priorities but did not implement the necessary policies and practices to do so. A White high school teacher shared her skepticism about present diversity efforts and their impact on retention: “There’s a whole lot of talk but not a lot of action here. So, I fear that [teachers of color] could get here and then say, ‘You’re not supporting me, I’m out of here.’ And we know that that is a problem. And so, it’s kind of like what a lot of colleges and universities are doing, you know. They get the kids. They don’t stay, you know.” This teacher implied that the efforts to diversify would not work. In this hypothetical example, she likened the teachers of color to students of color who leave college. She implied that structural reasons (Bond and Haynes 2014), such as a hostile school organizational climate for teachers of color, might lead to these newly recruited teachers of color leaving their schools—a claim that previous research supports (Gist and Bristol 2022).

Although educators across RPS heard the messaging from the district’s superintendent that a more diverse workforce would improve the school-based experiences of organizational members (Bond and Haynes 2014)—namely, students of color—they were less convinced that these efforts would work. One recently hired teacher of color reflected that: “I think [hiring teachers of color] is being talked about more. When I was in new teacher orientation in the summer, I looked around and didn’t necessarily think it was an incredibly diverse group of teachers. It’s something that on the surface they’re trying to make strides towards. But I don’t necessarily think it is a priority.” Teachers of color also felt conflicted about the district’s efforts and results with respect to teacher diversity. This newly hired teacher of color was surprised by the lack of diversity in the new teacher orientation, given the district’s stated commitment to diversifying the workforce.

These educators’ skepticism about action toward teacher diversity was despite the rhetoric they heard. According to the participants’ perceptions of organizational priorities, the superintendent communicated to educators that diversity was valued, and senior leaders were effective in initiating diversity initiatives. Indeed, participants indicated that conversations or diversity dialogues were the most tangible indicators of organizational change. However, in general, educators were decidedly more critical of the commitment and effectiveness of senior district leaders to deepen policy efforts aimed at diversifying the educator workforce. The most notable example of this was in the perceived district commitment to deepen and extend the work of the high school’s Equity Committee.



*Mixed-Message Diversity Management of the Equity Committee*

It is important to note that a minority of teachers were critical of the high school principal's support of the Equity Committee. For example, a White high school teacher criticized the school administration for being slow to bolster the Equity Committee and expand its efforts across the high school:

I know that there's a group on the equity team that was focused on hiring and retention of highly qualified and then diverse staff. But the administration doesn't come to the equity team meetings, with a couple of exceptions. The department heads fill the hiring, and there's no—there are no department heads coming to those meetings. . . . So, there hasn't been much push from administration to at least join the regularly scheduled equity meetings, although I know that there has been some work done with the equity team behind the scenes or with certain members of the equity team for the hiring practices. I just don't know what it is, and I don't know the response of the [school] administration.

Here, a White teacher at the high school relayed the dissonance she experienced between what she believed to be the purpose of the Equity Committee and how senior district and school leaders have gone about utilizing the Equity Committee to address the problem of the underrepresentation of teachers of color in the district.

Many participants praised the high school's Equity Committee for its instrumental role in promoting diversity initiatives and supporting teacher diversity efforts. However, many teachers we interviewed stressed that senior leadership—namely, the superintendent—actively discouraged a district-wide Equity Committee. One of the high school Equity Committee's cofounders recalled how the superintendent rebuffed his requests around increasing the Equity Committee's portfolio: "If the district would allow—especially the high school, the equity team has really done a lot in a short time. . . . So, our superintendent will not adopt it to do it district-wide. He put the halt on us. He said, 'Nope, I want you to just work on—concentrate on high school. You're high school people, concentrate on high school.'" The teacher felt that limits were placed on the work around diversifying the teacher workforce beyond the high school. The superintendent did not allow for the expansion of the Equity Committee's mandate. Given that one of the elementary school principals signaled being unwilling to engage in the recommended activities, we acknowledge that the superintendent's reluctance toward action may have been informed partly by his awareness of lack of interest or resistance from the elementary and secondary principals regarding diversifying the teacher workforce. In this sense, the ambivalent "organizational climate" (Bond and Haynes 2014) toward diversity work may have influenced a strategic

decision about where to place the Equity Committee and the scope of its work. Without a clear understanding of the superintendent's thinking, however, teachers were left to wonder why the Equity Committee's diversity work was constrained. Teachers and school building leaders across our study expressed frustration about the superintendent's apparent limiting of the Equity Committee's mandate, which in turn was perceived as limiting efforts to increase the number of teachers of color.

## Discussion

Across our findings, the misalignment between the intention to diversify the teacher workforce, as signaled by district leaders, and policy agendas at the school level slowed diversity progress and contributed to what we have termed mixed messages in diversity management. To embed these findings in existing frameworks of diversity management, we revisit Bond and Haynes's (2014) social-ecological framework of workplace diversity, specifically strong organizational climate and increasing access and representation. Again, it is essential to understand how signaling diversity management efforts can lead to an array of organizational responses in schools.

## Organizational Supports of Workplace Diversity

An important finding that alludes to a place of success for RPS school leaders was the consensus on valuing diversity for both uplifting a diversifying student body and enriching all school stakeholders. Bond and Haynes (2014) assert that diverse groups thrive when a collective notion of appreciating diversity is established. This understanding requires an organizational climate that is genuinely welcoming to diverse groups and a belief that their assets can buffer against barriers to diversity progress. It seemed that most of the RPS workforce saw how school and district leaders sought to increase positive attitudes toward diversity, and the strength of this messaging indicated a move toward organizational change. Another example of the organizational change was the formation of the Equity Committee, which was created as a partial response to the district's new focus on increasing and maintaining workforce diversity. Thus, there was evidence of organizational change in the wake of the school leaders' diversity messaging.

Even in the absence of a codified strategic diversity initiative plan, school leaders' mixed messaging still had some positive unintended outcomes. Although we were not given diversity metrics of hiring efforts across the district, we observed that four of the six teachers of color in our sample were in the first 3 years

of teaching at the high school. However, only one administrator of color explicitly attributed her recruitment to the efforts of district leaders to increase diversity. Although some school leaders believed they had made noticeable diversity goal progress, the lack of diversity metrics—with subsequent skepticism about the trajectory of these diversity hiring efforts—also highlights the fallout of mixed messaging.

## Increasing Access and Representation

Participants largely believed that increasing the ethnoracial diversity of RPS’s teacher workforce was an appropriate response to the increasingly diversifying student body. District and school leaders, however, were concerned about “the glass ceiling” or “the sticky floor” that perpetuated the RPS workforce as it was and limited change, leading them to boost the work of the high school’s Equity Committee. Unfortunately, this support was limited to the high school and underresourced.

Few organizational resources in the district were available to support diversifying the educator workforce. For example, the district’s human resources department consisted of one part-time White retiree. Bond and Haynes (2014) theorize that barriers to increasing access and representation can be fortified by biases in social categorization and skill-based evaluation. Some study participants noted that prejudicial bias played a role in the hiring trajectories of teachers, insinuating that the significant native-Rockridge representation in the teacher workforce was indicative of an in-group favoritism bias held by human resources and other hiring stakeholders. Though the hiring stakeholders at RPS were nominally interested in addressing the glass ceiling or sticky floor, our findings provided contradictory evidence in both the messaging of this desire and the resulting diversity management.

## Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

### *Research*

This article contributes to empirical literature on diversity hiring in US public education specifically by highlighting the best intentions and strategic efforts of district and school leaders toward diversifying their teaching force and how these efforts succeed or fail to build consensus and buy-in among educators. Critical to this effort were the voices and perspectives of educators of color, which highlight areas of alignment or misalignment between district messaging and action and

### *Mixed Messages and Diversity Management*

how they affect working conditions. Given the potential impacts of diversity initiatives on the professional and psychological well-being of teachers of color, we believe that subsequent research on diversity initiatives should include in-depth qualitative examinations of the organizational climate and the lived experiences of teachers of color. Focusing on the correlations between diversity hiring targets and other outcomes of interest, although valuable, risks amplifying narratives of “false progress” (Leslie 2019), unless these findings are balanced with investigations into the inner lives and points of view of teachers.

### *Policy*

One of the roadblocks to increased teacher ethnoracial diversity is the disconnect between the espoused and enacted diversity policies in demographically changing districts like Rockridge—namely, the persistence of unconscious bias among stakeholders, especially among hiring personnel. Thus, where the best intentions of district and school leaders have failed to make substantive inroads into increased teacher diversity, more deliberate policy efforts to mitigate the personal (if unconscious) biases of decision makers may be required. Just as grading rubrics with clearly defined evaluation criteria have been shown to reduce racial bias (cf. Quinn 2020), clearly defined hiring rubrics that emphasize job qualifications may effectively reduce the discretion (and thus the implicit bias) of hiring personnel (Brannon and Leuzinger 2014). Failure to address the role that unconscious bias plays in hiring may reinforce parochial attitudes and reward insider knowledge (see Noonan and Bristol 2020).

### *Practice*

As with policy, the practice of leadership—whether at the school or district level—demands an awareness of bias, especially unconscious bias, and an openness to critical self-examination and organizational risk-taking (Miller and Martin 2015). Like the professional learning communities for teachers aimed at developing their capacity to identify and redress bias (Kohli et al. 2021), developing professional learning communities for senior district leaders will also be critical to support their continuous development on how to design and implement equitable policies and practices. School and district leaders, especially in rapidly ethnoracial-diversifying communities like Rockridge, must acknowledge—to themselves and to the public—the ways that unconscious bias may impede decision-making messaging about diversity initiatives (Benson and Fiarman 2019).

## Conclusion

The superintendent, both in news stories and during our interviews, described how hiring a more ethnoracially diverse teacher workforce would be an important lever in improving the learning outcomes for the district's most marginalized students—students of color. Given RPS senior and school leaders' espoused beliefs about diversifying the teacher workforce, why did the organizational dynamics within RPS not enable the Equity Committee's efforts to increase teacher ethnoracial diversity? We contend that one constraining factor was the framing of a problem (the demographic mismatch) whose solution (increased teacher diversity) would principally benefit students of color. As Rochefort and Cobb (1994) note, social policies that aim to address the experiences of the “underclass” (63) and those viewed as “unworthy and undeserving” (66) by the dominant culture are rarely implemented in ways that lead to meaningful changes.

Beyond beliefs about whether students of color in the district were deserving of any meaningful policy prescriptions, we also observed that practices on the part of the district administrators constrained the hiring of teachers of color. The superintendent's lack of support for expanding the high school's Equity Committee throughout the district contributed to mixed messaging around diversity management. When encouraged by teachers in the district who were members of the Equity Committee to expand its reach beyond the high school, the superintendent disregarded those recommendations. We recognize that leaders' decisions are inherently political—and sometimes a leader must enlist a “coalition of the willing” even to make incremental progress toward their goals. However, as we suggest in this article, the framing of the problem coupled with a determination to follow through is critical toward managing resistance to change. Enacting a comprehensive policy to increase the percentage of teachers of color must be framed as one that benefits all students, not just students of color.

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