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They are Too Dumb to Know They are in a Bad School: A Critical Perspective of Anti- Black Racism and Devaluation of Student Voice in Educational Governance

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Research Article

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Abstract

On February 10th, 2026, during a virtual Community Education Council (CEC) District 3 meeting in New York City, Hunter College Associate Professor Dr. Allyson Friedman, Ph.D., was caught on a hot mic making overtly racist comments while an eighth-grade Black student testified against her school's potential closure. Friedman's statement–" they are too dumb to know they are in a bad school" -- exemplifies the intersection of anti-Black-deficit thinking, Whiteness as unexamined normativity, and the dismissal of student voice in educational decision-making processes (Byfield & NBC New York Staff, 2026; Lavietes, 2026; Long, 2026).

Grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT), deficit frameworks, and Whiteness Studies, this article analyzes the incident as a manifestation of ordinary racism embedded in the governance of public education. CRT reveals how such comments sustain racial hierarchies and undermine counter-story telling by students of color (SOC) (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Deficit thinking locates problems within Black students and communities rather than systemic disinvestment and structural inequities (Valencia, 2010a). At the same time, Whiteness Studies exposes the backstage enactment of the White racial frame that normalizes anti-Blackness even among ostensibly progressive professionals (Leonardo, 2009). This case underscores persistent patterns of racialized school closure debates and the urgent need for racially just educational leadership that centers equity over deficit ideologies. Implications for policy, teacher preparation, and community advocacy are discussed.

Introduction

Public education in the United States (US) remains a critical site where racial ideologies are both reproduced and contested, particularly in debates over school closures, resource allocation, and community governance. These processes frequently revealed the tension between professed commitments to equity and the persistence of anti-Black logics that devalue the lived experiences and agencies of SOC. A recent hot mic incident involving a faculty member during a CEC meeting exemplifies how such logics surface even in spaces designed for Democratic participation, underscoring the urgency of sustained scholarly interrogation (Byfield & NBC New York Staff, 2026; Lavietes, 2026; Long, 2026).

This article employs deficit frameworks and Whiteness Studies as interlocking analytic tools to examine the racial dimensions of educational decision-making. CRT grounds the centrality of race and racism in shaping institutional practices, challenging liberal Notions of color blindness and meritocracy while challenging the experiential knowledge of racially minoritized communities (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Deficit frameworks illuminate how educational challenges are pathologized as internal feelings of students and families rather than outcomes of systemic exclusion and disinvestment (Valencia, 2010a). Whiteness Studies, in turn, interrogates The Invisible norms and privileges that sustain racial hierarchies, revealing how dominant racial frames operate through everyday interactions and policy discourses (Leonardo, 2009).

Together, these perspectives offer a robust lens for understanding not only isolated expressions of bias but also their embeddedness within broader structures of educational governance. By centering this analysis, the paper contributes to ongoing conversations about the role of racial ideology in perpetuating inequitable schooling outcomes and the imperative for transformative leadership that disrupts rather than reproduces deficit-oriented thinking. The discussion advances a call for greater accountability and the amplification of counter-narratives in policy arenas that profoundly shape the futures of Black and Brown youth.

Theoretical Framework: Intersections of Critical Race Theory, Deficit Frameworks, and Whiteness Studies in Educational Analysis

No scholarship has long grappled with the persistence of racial inequities in schooling, from resource disparities and disciplinary practices to policies governing school closures and community governance. To rigorously analyze a contemporary case in which a White faculty member's hot mic comments pathologized Black students' intelligence and capacity to recognize poor schooling conditions during testimony about potential school closure, this paper draws upon three interlocking theoretical traditions: CRT, deficit frameworks (also termed deficit thinking or deficit ideology), and Whiteness Studies. These frameworks are not merely additive but synergistic, providing a multi-layered analytical lens that moves from macro-structural critiques of racism to the ideological mechanisms that sustain it and the everyday enactments that reveal its operation in ostensibly neutral or progressive spaces. Together, they enable a nuanced examination of how anti-Black sentiment operates in public education decision-making forums, justifies inequitable policies, and silences or dismisses the voices of SOC (Ladson-Billings, 2021).

CRT emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a legal scholarly movement led by scholars such as Derek Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado, and was later powerfully extended into education by Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate IV in their seminal 1995 article (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT fundamentally challenges the liberal legal and social order's claims of objectivity, neutrality, and color blindness, arguing instead that racism is not an aberration but a normal, ordinary, and embedded feature of American society and its institutions, including schools. Key tenets relevant to this analysis includes: (1) the ordinaryness of racism, which posits that racial subordination is woven into everyday fabric of social life rather than consisting solely of overt, exceptional acts; (2) interest convergence, or material determination, which suggest that racial progress for people of color (POC) occurs primarily when it lines with the interest of White elites; (3) the critique of liberalism and colorblind ideologies that mass ongoing racial hierarchies; (4) the social construction of race alongside the material consequences of racial categorization; (5) intersectionality, recognizing that race intersects with other axes of identity such as class, gender common age; and (6) the importance of counter storytelling or voice, which elevates the experiential knowledge and narratives of POC as legitimate and necessary challenges to dominant majoritarian stories (Ladson-Billings, 1996; 2021)

In the context of this paper, CRT's tenets of racism as ordinary are particularly salient for interpreting comments that dismiss Black students as too dumb to recognize deficient schooling. Such statements

are not isolated slips but reflections on deeply ingrained assumptions within educational governance. The counter-storytelling tenet guides the analysis by positioning the 8th-grade Black student's testimony against school closure as a powerful Act of resistance and knowledge production that directly challenges the deficit-laden majoritarian narrative offered in the same meeting. CRT also helps frame School closure debates themselves as sites where interest convergence may operate– decisions framed as fiscally or educationally necessary often converge with broader patterns of disinvestment in Black, Brown, and Latino/a/x communities while benefiting other interests. By centering race and racism as central rather than peripheral, CRT provides the overarching architecture for understanding how educational policies and discourses produce racial inequity.

Deficit frameworks, systematically critiqued by Richard R. Valencia in words such as *The Evolution of`Deficit Thinking* (1997) and *Dismantling Contemporary Deficit Thinking (2010)*, Refer to a pervasive ideological orientation and education that attributes school failure, underachievement, or perceived deficiencies primarily to supposed shortcomings within students, their families, or their cultures– particularly those from income and racially minoritized backgrounds– rather than to structural, institutional, or systemic factors. Deficit thinking is categorized as a form of pseudoscience rooted in racial and class bias. It blames the victim by locating problems internally (e.g., lack of intelligence, motivation, proper socialization, or cultural capital) while ignoring or downplaying high schools and policies that are structured in ways that disadvantage certain groups. Valencia identifies core components, including victim blaming, oppressive pseudoscientific explanations (such as genetic or cultural deficiency models), and a failure to examine School-level or societal structures that create or exacerbate inequities (Valencia, 2010a; 2010b).

This framework aligns directly with the paper's focus because the hot mic comment explicitly invoked the deficit view of Black students' intellectual capacity and perceptual abilities ("too dumb to know they are in a bad school"). Such language exemplifies classic deficit thinking by pathologizing the students themselves rather than interrogating the school's conditions, broader resource inequities, or the processes that lead to closure discussions. Deficit Frameworks help guide the argument by providing precise conceptual tools to deconstruct how such rhetoric functions ideologically: it justifies punitive or disinvesting policies (such as closures) by rendering affected communities as inherently deficient and thus undeserving or incapable of effective advocacy. The framework also highlights the pseudoscientific nature of these claims, linking them to historical patterns of racialized intelligence testing and cultural deprivation theories that have long been used to rationalize inequity in education. By applying deficit analysis, the paper can demonstrate how individual statements like the one in question are not merely personal prejudices but instantiations of a broader ideological system that sustains racial stratification in schooling.

Whiteness Studies (or Critical Whiteness Studies) complement and extend the above by shifting analytical Focus to the dominant racial category itself– examining Whiteness not as a neutral or biological given but as a social, historical, and ideological construct that confers privilege, maintains supremacy, and often operates invisibly or through colorblind discourses. Scholars such as Zeus

Leonardo have been bringing these insights to education, defining Whiteness as “a racial discourse” tied to power and examining how it manifests in schools through unexamined norms, emotional responses (e.g., White fragility or guilt), and institutional practices. Key tenets include: (1) recognition of Whiteness as property or a form of capital (building on Cheryl Harris); (2) the operation of color blind ideologies that allow racism to persist without explicit racial language; (3) the emotionalities of Whiteness, such as defensiveness or disinvestment when racist named; and (4) the ways Whiteness naturalizes itself as the unspoken standard against which others are measured and found wanting (Matias & Mackay, 2015; Olcon, 2023).

Whiteness Studies is essential to this analysis because the speaker in the incident occupies a position of relative racial and institutional power (as a White Associate Professor and parent in the district). The framework illuminates how comments rooted in deficit assumptions about Black students can emerge from and reinforce the White racial frame– even in public, recorded settings– while remaining unremarkable or defended as private opinion until exposed. It guides the argument by probing the mechanisms through which Whiteness sustains itself: the incident reveals not only anti-Black content but also the broader context in which such views can be voiced in a community education forum without immediate structural consequences, highlighting the protective shield that Whiteness provides. Furthermore, it connects to CRT's critique of color blindness by showing how seemingly race-neutral discussions of bad schools or student capacity can mask racialized judgments.

The integration of these three theories creates a robust, common, multi-dimensional framework for the paper's argument. CRT supplies the macro-level instance that racism is structural and ordinary in education, allowing the analysis to situate the incident within longer histories of racialized school policy and the dismissal of Black voices. Deficit frameworks provide the mid-level ideological critique, enabling precise deconstruction of the specific language (“too dumb”) as a tool that blames Black students and communities while obscuring systemic causes of school challenges. Whiteness Studies offers micro- and meso-level examinations of how these dynamics are enacted by individuals positioned within dominant racial categories, revealing the often invisible operations of power, emotion, and normativity that allow such statements to surface and persist. Together, they moved the analysis beyond surface-level condemnation of individual bias toward a structural and ideological understanding of how anti-Blackness operates in educational governance– informing implications for policy, leadership preparation, and community advocacy.

That tripartite lens will guide the subsequent argument by structuring the examination of the incident as a regulatory case: first, contextualizing the evidence and immediate reactions; then, applying the framework to unpack its racial, ideological, and power dimensions; and finally, deriving border lessons for disrupting these patterns. Having established this theoretical foundation, the following section turns to the detailed description and contextualization of the hot mic incident itself, setting the stage for the theoretical analysis that follows.

The Hot Mic Incident: A Case Study of Anti-Black Deficit Thinking in Educational Governance

On February 10th, 2026, a virtual public meeting of New York City's CEC District 3 became a site of a revelatory moment that exposed the persistence of anti-Black ideologies within spaces tentatively dedicated to democratic participation and educational decision-making. CEC District 3, which serves portions of Manhattan's Upper West Side, Harlem, and Morningside Heights, convened to address contentious proposals to close, phase out, or relocate several Middle School programs. These discussions occurred amid broader citywide debates over school enrollment declines, resource allocation, and mayoral initiatives affecting public education. Students, parents, educators, and community members participated in extended public testimony, with many advocating for the preservation of schools and vital community anchors.

Central to the proceedings was the testimony of Middle School students, including an 8th-grade Black student from Community Action School (M.S. 258), which has a demographic composition of approximately 29% Black and 65% Latino/a/x students. The students spoke emotionally and at length against the proposed closure or phasing out of her school, articulating concerns about disruptions to education, loss of community and safety, and the erasure of spaces where SOC could thrive. Her testimony exemplified the counter-narratives that SOC frequently offer in public forums– challenging dominant framings of underperforming or failing schools but emphasizing relational, cultural, and structural assets rather than deficits. Other students from affected schools similarly stayed late to voice opposition, underscoring the high stakes for families in the district. Approximately an hour into the testimony recordings, while the 8th-grade student continued her in-person advocacy via the hybrid format, a voice from the Zoom component of the meeting interrupted the proceedings. The speaker, later identified as Allyson Freidman–an Associate Professor in the Department of Biological Sciences at Hunter College (part of the City University of New York) and a district parent whose daughter attended a local public school (The Center School, which itself faced potential relocation)--was supposedly unaware that her microphone was live. Assuming she was speaking privately to her child at home, Friedman made the following audible remarks:

They are too dumb to know they are in a bad school. Apparently, Martin Luther King said it, like if you train a Black person well enough, they will know how to use the back. You do not have to tell them anymore.

These comments directly pathologized Black students' intellectual capacity and perceptual awareness, framing them as inherently deficient in their ability to recognize or respond to inadequate schooling conditions. The reference to training Black people to "use the back" appeared to invoke (and misattribute) historical tropes of segregation and subservience, loosely and inaccurately drawing from or paraphrasing ideals in Carter G. Woodson's 1993 work The Mis-Education of the Negro, which discusses how control of thinking eliminates the need for explicit coercion. Freeman later claimed in statements

that she was attempting to explain concepts of systemic racism to her daughter by referencing such historical examples and not directing comments at the students or the testifying child.

Interruption was immediate and jarring. Another meeting participant quickly interjected, stating something to the effect of, "Friedman, what you are saying is absolutely audible here. You have got to stop," alerting her that her microphone was unmuted and her private aside had been broadcast to the entire virtual and in-person audience. Attendees, including parents, students, and council members, reacted with visible shock; some covered their mouths in disbelief, and the comments registered. The meeting continued, but the moment quickly spread beyond the room through recordings and clips widely shared online. The incident unfolded against a backdrop of heightened tensions in District 3 regarding school closures and relocations, policies that community advocates argued disproportionately impacted schools serving higher proportions of Black and Latino/a/x students. Proponents of the changes cited enrollment challenges and the need for efficiency. At the same time, opponents, including student testifiers, emphasize the value of neighborhood schools as sites of stability, cultural affirmation, and resistance to broader patterns of educational disinvestment. Friedman's presence as both a parent and a tenured academic added layers of complexity: her comments emerge from a position of institutional Authority and relative racial privilege within a public forum ostensibly committed to equity and Community input. In the days and weeks following February 10th, the remarks went viral, generating intense public scrutiny, media coverage across Outlets including Amsterdam news, Chalkbeat, The New York Times, CBS New York, and ABC7, and widespread condemnation. Community leaders, parents, and organizations such as Parents Supporting Parents NY issued statements and organized responses. Tanesha Grant, Executive Director of Parent Supporting Parent NY, articulated a common sentiment in a letter calling for Friedman's removal from educational roles: "We are not debating intent. We are naming the impact…If you speak anti-Blackness in public education spaces, you are unfit to educate Black children." Petitions and public commentary echoed demands for accountability, with critics arguing that such views had no place in the environment shaping the lives of Black, Brown, and Latino/a/x youth. New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani publicly condemned the remarks as racist.

Institutional responses followed swiftly. Hunter College issued statements describing the remarks as abhorrent and confirmed that it was reviewing the situation in accordance with its conduct and non-discrimination policies. On or around February 25th- 26, 2026, the college placed Friedman on administrative leave pending the outcome of its investigation. The CEC District 3 itself unanimously passed a statement condemning the deeply harmful and racist comments. Friedman issued a public apology and explanation, acknowledging that her words had caused harm and pain despite her stated intent to discuss systemic racism with her child. She emphasized taking responsibility for the impact and expressed regret, while maintaining that the comments were not directed at any student or group. This episode did not occur in isolation. It surfaced during a period of active advocacy by students and families resisting School closures, highlighting the contrast between the courage of young Black, Brown, and Latino/a/x voices asserting their right to equitable, community-rooted education and the casual deployment of deficit-laden assumptions by adults exerting influence. The hybrid format of the meeting– blending in-person student testimony with virtual parental participation– further amplified the exposure

when private speech collided with public accountability. With the factual contours and immediate aftermath of the incident now established in detail, the subsequent section applies the integrated theoretical framework of CRT, deficit thinking, and Whiteness Studies to interrogate the deeper ideological, structural, and power-laden dimensions of these events. The analysis will demonstrate how the hot mic moment functions not as an anomaly but as a window into ordinary mechanisms of anti-Blackness in educational governance.

Analysis: Applying Critical Race Theory, Deficit Frameworks, and Whiteness to the Hot Mic Incident

The incident at the CEC District 3 meeting exemplifies the ordinary operation of anti-Black racism within educational governance. While the 8th-grade student from Community Action School delivered powerful, in-person testimony against the proposed closure of her school– articulating the importance of a site of safety, relationships, and community– Associate Professor Allyson Friedman's unmuted comments from the Zoom platform directly contradicted and pathologized advocacy. Her audible statements– "they are dumb to know they are in a bad school" and the subsequent reference to training Black people to "use the back"-- interrupted the students' counter-narratives and revealed deeply embedded ideological assumptions. This article integrates CRT, deficit frameworks, and Whiteness Studies to examine the incident through emergent themes directly from the case:

(1) The pathologization of Black student capacity.

(2) Suppression of counter-storytelling in public forums.

(3) The role of Whiteness and positionality in reproducing anti-Blackness.

(4) The dynamic of institutional and community accountability.

These things are not isolated but interconnected, demonstrating how structural racism, ideological deficit thinking, and the invisible operations of Whiteness converge to undermine Equitable educational decision-making.

Pathologization of Black Student Capacity: Deficit Thinking as Ordinary Racism

A central theme emerging from the case is the explicit pathologization of Black students' intellectual and perceptual abilities. Friedman's declaration that Black students are "too dumb to know they are in a bad school" represents a classic manifestation of deficit thinking, which Valencia (2010) identifies as an oppressive ideology that attributes educational challenges or perceived shortcomings to internal deficiencies within students and communities of color–such as lack of intelligence, motivation, or cultural capital–rather than to systemic inequities, resource disparities, or policy decisions. This framework directly illuminates how Friedman's comment functioned to blame the victim: by asserting

that Black students lack the cognitive capacity to recognize inadequate schooling, the remark shifted focus away from the structural conditions prompting closure debates in District 3 (including enrollment challenges and potential relocations disproportionately affecting schools serving higher proportions of Black, Brown, and Latino/a/x students) and onto an alleged racialized intellectual deficit.

CRT reinforces this analysis by framing such pathologization as ordinary rather than exceptional. As Ladson-Billings and Tata (1995) argue, racism in education is embedded in institutional discourses and practices, including those that justify disinvestment or closure policies through narratives of deficiency. The “too dumb” trope aligns with historical patterns in which deficit assumptions have rationalized unequal schooling for Black students, from early intelligence testing to contemporary school reform rhetoric. Here, the comment operated as a micro-level enactment of this ordinary racism, seeking to delegitimize the very students most affected by the policies under discussion. Whiteness Studies adds further depth by highlighting how such pathologization emerges from and sustains the White racial frame–a dominant interpretive lens that positions Whiteness as normative and rational while constructing Blackness as deficient or irrational (Leonardo, 2009). Friedman’s remarks, delivered from a position of racial and institutional authority as a White tenured professor, exemplify how Whiteness naturalizes these judgments, rendering them appear as common sense until exposed.

Suppressing Counter-Storytelling: The Collision of Students' Voices and Majoritarian Narratives

Another prominent theme is the suppression of Black student voice and agency within a public educational forum. The eighth-grade student’s testimony constituted a clear counter-narrative, challenging dominant framings of schools serving SOC as inherently problematic or bad. Drawing on CRT’s emphasis on the experiential knowledge of POC and the importance of counter-storytelling as a method of resistance (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), her advocacy asserted the importance of insight, resilience, and the value of community-rooted education beyond metrics such as enrollment or test scores. Friedman’s hot mic interruption directly undermined this by asserting that Black students lack the discernment to engage meaningfully with such issues.

Deficit frameworks explain the mechanism of this suppression: by labeling students as “too dumb,” the comment enacted a form of epistemic violence that dismisses their knowledge claims a priori. This aligns with Valencia’s (2010) critique of how deficit thinking shields institutions from accountability by rendering affected communities as incapable of legitimate advocacy. Whiteness Studies further illuminate the power dynamics at play. The hybrid meeting format–where in-person student testimony collides with a private aside from a White parent/academic–reveals how Whiteness can operate through the assumption of private speech spaces even in public governance settings. Leonardo (2009) notes that Whiteness often maintains hegemony through emotional and discursive strategies that recenter dominant perspectives when challenged. The immediate reaction from another attendee (“you gotta

stop") and the subsequent viral circulation of the clip disrupted this attempted suppression, transforming a backstage moment into a public counter-story of its own.

Revealing Whiteness and Positionality: Backstage Racism in Educational Spaces

The incident powerfully exposes the role of Whiteness and positional power in reproducing anti-Blackness. Friedman, tending as both a District parent (with a child at a local school facing potential relocation) and a tenured White faculty member in biological sciences, occupied intersecting positions of racial privilege and institutional authority. Her comments, initially framed privately to her daughter and later defended as an attempt to explain systemic racism through historical reference (including loose invocation of ideas from Carter G. Woodson's *The Mis-Education of the Negro)*, illustrate common patterns within Whiteness: The performance of racial awareness that nonetheless reproduces harm, alongside defensive reframing when impact is named (Leonardo, 2009; Matias, 2016).

CRT connects this to the broader critique of colorblind liberalism. Public forums like CEC meetings claim neutrality and democratic openness, yet they permit racialized dismissals when they occur under the guise of private conversation. Harris's (1993) conceptualization of Whiteness as property is particularly relevant here: Whiteness confers not only material privileges but also the presumptive right to define reality, judge capacity, and control narratives. The misattribution or selective use of Black historical figures in Friedman's remarks further demonstrates how Whiteness can appropriate elements of Black intellectual tradition while inverting their meaning to reinforce subordination rather than liberation. This theme underscores that the incident was not merely about individual bias about how Whiteness structures who can speak with authority and whose knowledge is rendered credible in educational governance.

Institutional and Community Response: Accountability, Resistance, and the Limits of Liberation

Finally, the rapid institutional and community reactions highlight themes of accountability and resistance. Hunter College's description of the remarks as abhorrent, its decision to place Friedman on administrative leave pending an investigation, and the CEC District 3's condemnation reflect institutional mechanisms in response to exposure. Community leaders, including Tanesha Grant of Parents Supporting Parents NY, and broader public outrage–manifested in petitions, media coverage, and statements from figures such as Major Zohran Mamdani–insisted on naming impact over intent and affirmed that such rhetoric has no place in spaces shaping Black children's futures.

CRT interprets these responses through the lens of interest convergence and the power of counter-storytelling: sustained community pressure made continued inaction costly, forcing a degree of accountability. Deficit frameworks reveal how initial defenses (e.g., reframing comments as educational

discussions of systemic racism) attempted to recenter White intent and expertise while minimizing harm. Whiteness Studies examines the emotional dimensions, including potential fragility in apologies that acknowledge impact while distancing from intent. Collectively, these potential for resistance when racism is made visible and the limits of liberal institutional responses that often prioritize procedural review over transformative structural change.

Integrated Implications

Integrating CRT, deficit frameworks, and Whiteness Studies across these themes reveals the incident as a convergence of ordinary racism, ideological pathologization, and the operations of Whiteness within educational governance. The student's testimony and the subsequent community resistance stand as powerful counterforces, affirming the necessity of centering marginalized voices. This analysis carries implications for policy and practice: educational leaders must have mechanisms to actively amplify student and community counter-narratives, closure debates, interrogate deficit assumptions and institutional discourse, and implement robust accountability structures that address both individual conduct and the broader ideology they reflect. Preparation programs for educators and administrators should prioritize deep engagement with these Frameworks to disrupt the reproduction of anti-Blackness. Having examined the incident through these integrated thematic lenses, the following section discusses broader implications for racially just educational leadership and offers recommendations for policy common practice, and future research

Implications for Practice and Policy: Disrupting Anti-Blackness in Educational Decision-Making

The analysis of the hot mic incident underscores how anti-Black deficit thinking and the unexamined operations of Whiteness can infiltrate public educational governance, even when forms are intended for community voice and democratic decision-making. This case compels educational leaders, policymakers, and practitioners to move beyond reactive measures toward proactive, transformative strategies that center racial justice. The following implications draw on established scholarship while introducing targeted recommendations for leadership preparation, policy reform, accountability mechanisms, and community engagement. These are built on the theoretical foundations of CRT, deficit critiques, and Whiteness Studies to offer concrete pathways to disrupt anti-Blackness in school-closure processes, public meetings, and broader educational systems.

Leadership Preparation and Anti-Racist Praxis

Educational leadership programs and ongoing professional development must prioritize anti-racist Frameworks that equip leaders to recognize and interrupt deficit ideologies and Whiteness in real time. Diem and Weltson (2021) provide a robust model for anti-racist Educational Leadership and Policy, advocating that leaders systematically analyze policies through racial lenses and develop protocols for

equitable decision-making. Training should include simulations of governance scenarios, such as CEC meetings, where leaders practice responding to harmful speech, amplifying student counter-narratives, and facilitating asset-based discussions about school quality. Culturally responsive school leadership (Khalifa, 2018). Further emphasizes the need for leaders to build authentic relationships with communities of color and challenge color-invasive practices that allow incidents like Friedman's comments to emerge unchecked. Professional development for sitting administrators should incorporate self-reflexive work on Whiteness (Leonardo, 2009) and tools for conducting equity audits of closure proposals to prevent the production of spatial and racial injustice (Tieken & Auldridge-Reveles, 2019).

Policy Reform in School Governance and Closures

Policymakers at district, state, and federal levels must redesign School closure and resource allocation processes to explicitly counter deficit thinking and structural anti-Blackness. Tieken and Auldridge-Reveles (2019) demonstrate in their analysis of school closure as social injustice that such decisions disproportionately harm communities of color, eroding access to vital institutions while advancing neoliberal efficiency narratives. Recommendations include mandatory racial impact assessments for any closure or relocation proposal, requiring disaggregated data on the effects of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, alongside meaningful mechanisms for student and family input. Building on CRT principles, policies should institutionalize counter-storytelling forums in which youth voices carry binding weight within governing bodies such as CECs (Welton et al., 2022). Hybrid meeting guidelines should enforce real-time moderation, clear muting protocols, and post-incident review processes to adjust harmful speech. State education departments could adopt anti-racist policy decision-making protocols (Diem & Weltson, 2021) that evaluate proposals for deficit language and prioritize community asset mapping over enrollment metrics alone.

Accountability, Teacher/Faculty Development, and Community Partnerships

Institutions must strengthen accountability for faculty and staff participating in public educational spaces. Beyond individual conduct reviews, universities and districts should implement system-wide anti-racist training that addresses the intersection of personal beliefs and professional responsibilities. Wright (2022) highlights the deep roots of inequity in educational leadership, rooted in coloniality and racial capitalism, and calls for leaders to confront these legacies and reform efforts. Partnerships with community organizations– such as those that responded swiftly in District 3– should be formalized to co-create Safe spaces for student advocacy and monitor policy implementation. Student voice initiatives, when authentically implemented, have demonstrated the power to transform school and district practices (Mitra, 2018; Zion et al., 2024). School should establish protected student advisory roles in governance with training on policy analysis and leadership, ensuring Black, Brown, and Latino/a/x students are not positioned as citizens in waiting but as active agents) Castro et al., 2024).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this case eliminates key dynamics, future empirical work should examine the prevalence of deficit discourses in school closure processes across urban districts and evaluate the long-term impact of anti-racist governance interventions. Longitudinal studies tracking policy changes and student outcomes following high-visibility incidents would further advance the field. By operationalizing these implications, Educational Systems can transform potentially harmful sites into engines of equity. The courage of the student testifier and the community response in this case remind us that meaningful disruption of anti-Blackness begins with listening to those most affected and committing to structural change. Educational leaders who embrace these practices not only address immediate harm but also contribute to broader movements for racially just schooling.

Conclusion: Lessons from the Incident and Pathways for Anti-Racist Educational Praxis

The hot mic incident involving Associate Professor Allyson Friedman during the February 10th, 2026, CEC District 3 meeting exemplifies how anti-Black deficit thinking and the unexamined operations of Whiteness manifest as ordinary racism in educational governance, particularly in school closure debates that marginalize student voice (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Valencia, 2010; Leonardo, 2009). By applying CRT, deficit frameworks, and Whiteness Studies, this article demonstrates that such comments are not aberrations but reflections of depressional, ideological, and discursive forces that pathologize Black, Brown, and Latino/a/x students while shielding dominant interests. This case underscores the urgent need for transformative leadership and policy that center counter-narratives, reject deficit ideologies, and interrogate Whiteness and public decision-making forums. As Harris (1993) reminds us, Whiteness as property continues to shape access, authority, and educational spaces unless actively disrupted. Educational leaders, policymakers, and institutions must move beyond performative responses to embed anti-racist practices that amplify Black and other racial/ethnic minority student agency and ensure equitable outcomes. Ultimately, The Bravery of the student testifier in the community resistance in the incident or for hope. By operationalizing these theoretical tools, the field can advance the war effort more broadly through educational governance that affirms humanity and the potential of all students.

Declarations

Author Contribution

I am the sole author of the manuscript. I conceived the study, developed the critical theoretical framework, conducted the analysis of anti-Black racism and the devaluation of student voice within educational governance, and wrote and revised the entire manuscript. This manuscript advances scholarship on educational governance, student choice, and anti-Black racism by making visible the everyday discursive mechanisms through which Black students' knowledge and lived experiences are systematically devalued. Rather than treating deficit language as isolated or unintentional, it situates

such statements within broader structures of racialized power that shape policy, leadership practice, and institutional design-making. By centering the devaluation of student voice as both a symptom and a technology of anti-Blackness, the paper challenges dominant approaches that frame student voice as a neutral or purely pedagogical good. It pushes the field to interrogate whose voices are authorized, whose are dismissed as illegitimate, and how these judgments reproduce hierarchical schooling. In doing so, it offers a sharper critical lens for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to move beyond performative inclusion toward more substantive forms of epistemic justice and democratic participation in education

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