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Toxic Climate and Staff Exodus: A Case Study of High Turnover in a Predominantly African-American College Preparatory School

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Abstract

This case study examines the rigid attrition of 10 staff members within a single academic year at a predominantly Black college preparatory school led by a Black principal and largely staffed by Black educators. Despite the demographic alignment between leadership, faculty, and student population, the school experienced a pervasive sense of toxicity that contributed to significant staff departures. Drawing on organizational climate and toxic leadership frameworks, the study explores how interpersonal dynamics, communication patterns, and leadership practices fostered an environment perceived as psychologically unsafe and professionally demoralizing. The analysis highlights the complex interplay between shared racial identity and organizational culture, challenging assumptions that demographic congruence alone ensures healthy workplace conditions. Findings underscore the consequences of unresolved toxicity for Teacher retention, institutional stability, and the school's capacity to fulfill its college preparatory mission. The findings offer implications for educational leaders, particularly those serving in predominantly Black institutions (PBI), on cultivating inclusive, affirming, and sustainable professional climates. This case contributes to broader conversations on staff retention, leadership accountability, and hidden costs of toxic organizational environments in urban educational settings.

Introduction

Staff retention remains one of the most persistent challenges facing Urban schools, particularly those serving predominantly students of color (SOC). High rates of teacher and staff turnover disrupt instructional continuity, erode institutional knowledge, and undermine schools' capacity to fulfill college preparatory missions for students who already navigate systemic educational inequities (Carver Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Ronfeldt et al., 2013). While compensation, workload, and external policy pressures receive considerable attention, a substantial body of research demonstrates that internal organizational conditions—especially school leadership, collegial relationships, and elements of school culture—are among the strongest predictors of whether educators stay or leave (Simon & Johnson, 2015).

This case examines a predominantly Black college preparatory school staffed largely by Black Educators and led by a Black principal. Within a single academic year, the school lost 10 staff members. Departing and remaining Educators described its pervasive sense of toxicity marked by strained interpersonal dynamics, inconsistent leadership practices, and a climate many experienced as psychologically unsafe. The case is noteworthy because racial congruence between principal, faculty, and students is generally associated with improved retention. Research consistently shows that Black teachers are less likely to lead schools led by Black principals and those with a critical mass of Black colleagues (Bartanen & Grossom, 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2025). In New York City (NYC), for example, working under a Black principal reduced Black teacher turnover by approximately 14% (Rodriguez et al., 2025). The rapid attrition observed here therefore raises critical questions about the conditions under which demographic alignment fails to produce the expected protective effects.

Purpose of the Study

This case study examines the organizational conditions, leadership practices, and interpersonal dynamics that contributed to the rapid departure of 10 staff members from a predominantly Black college preparatory school in one academic year. Specifically, the study seeks to understand how a climate perceived as toxic emerged and persisted despite the shared racial identity of the principal, the majority of the teaching staff, and the student body. By analyzing the interplay between leadership behavior, communication patterns, psychological safety, and staff experiences, the study aims to illuminate the mechanisms through which organizational toxicity can override the retention benefits typically associated with racial congruence (Bartanen & Grissom, 2021; Rodriquez et al., 2025; Simon & Johnson, 2015).

Significance of the Case

This case holds particular significance for educational leadership and Equity scholarship. It challenges the assumption that racial representation alone is sufficient to produce healthy, affirming professional climates. In an era when many urban systems actively seek to increase the presence of educators of color (EOC), this school's experience underscores that demographic alignment does not automatically translate into psychological safety, professional respect, or substantial working conditions (Kholi, 2018; Simon & Johnson, 2015). The loss of 10 members in a single year represents not merely a personnel challenge but a potential threat to the school’s capacity to deliver on its college preparatory promise.

Moreover, the case contributes to broader conversations about toxic organizational climates and Leadership accountability within PBIs. While external racial hostility has been well documented as a driver of attrition among teachers of color (TOC) (Kohli, 2018), less attention has been paid to how power, communication, and relational practices can generate harm even when external racial dynamics are less salient. Research on relational trust and school culture emphasizes that the quality of adult relationships, particularly between leaders and teachers, is a core resource for improvement and retention (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). When those relationships become sources of demoralization rather than support, even demographically congruent settings can experience rapid staff flight. For school leaders, district administrators, and researchers concerned with retention in urban and MSIs, this case offers a cautionary illustration of the hidden costs of unaddressed toxicity and the urgent need for intentional, relationally grounded leadership that prioritizes the well-being of the adults charged with educating students.

Contextual Background of the School

School Demographics and Mission

The school under examination is a college preparatory 6–12 school serving a predominantly Black student population in an urban setting. Like many institutions designed to expand post-secondary

access for SOC, its mission centers on rigorous academic preparation, college readiness, and cultivating students who can navigate and contribute to higher education and professional pathways (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). Such schools, elite college preparatory/rigorous educational settings, often explicitly or implicitly emphasize cultural affirmation alongside academic excellence, recognizing that students from historically underserved communities benefit from environments that are firm identity while maintaining high expectations (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Nationally, schools with high concentrations of Black students frequently operate under heightened accountability pressures and resource constraints compared with more affluent or predominantly White schools, conditions that shape both student outcomes and the working environment for adults (Simon & Johnson, 2015; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019).

In the broader urban context, student demographics in many large districts remain far more racially diverse than the teaching workforce. For example, in NYC public schools, SOC constitute the large majority of enrollment while White teachers continue to comprise more than half of the teaching force (Rodriguez et al., 2025). Predominantly Black schools that achieve higher proportions of same-race educators therefore stand out as sites where demographic congruence between students and staff is relatively strong–arrangement research links to potential benefits for student belonging, academic outcomes, and teacher retention (Bartanen & Grissom, 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2025).

Leadership Structure

This school is led by one Black principal, supported by a team of eight assistant principals, six of whom are Black and two of other racial backgrounds. This composition produces a leadership team that is predominantly Black and closely aligned with the racial demographics of both the student body and most of the teaching staff. Research consistently shows that principal-teacher racial congruence is associated with lower turnover rates, particularly for Black educators. Studies of large urban systems indicate that Black teachers working under Black principals experienced a meaningfully reduced likelihood of leaving their schools (Bartanen & Grissom, 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2025). In NYC data spanning nearly a decade, the presence of a Black principal was linked to an approximately 14% reduction in Black teacher turnover (Rodriguez et al., 2025). The presence of multiple Black assistant principals further extends opportunities for same-race supervisory relationships and may reinforce perceptions of cultural understanding and support across the administrative ranks.

Same-race leadership is theorized to foster greater relational trust, cultural alignment, and perceptions of psychological safety–elements identified as core resources for school improvement and staff stability (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Simon & Johnson, 2015). In this case, the leadership structure therefore presented conditions that, according to the literature, would ordinarily support retention rather than accelerate attrition. The rapid departure of 10 staff members under a predominantly Black leadership team thus raises important questions about how internal climate and interpersonal dynamics can override the protective effects typically associated with racial congruence in school leadership.

Staff Composition

The teaching and professional staff are predominantly Black, creating a relatively high degree of racial congruence among adults and between adults and the student body. This composition contrasts with citywide and national patterns in which TOC remain underrepresented relative to student demographics (Pew Research Center analyses of NCES data, Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). Research indicates that schools with a critical mass of same-race colleagues also tend to retain Black teachers at higher rates (Rodriguez et al., 2025). Against this backdrop, losing 10 staff members in a single academic year is especially striking. Of the staff members who departed, six self-identified as Black, two as Asian, and four as White. The departure of six Black educators from predominantly Black staff is particularly noteworthy given evidence that racial congruence with both principals and peers typically functions as a protective factor against turnover (Bartanen & Grissom, 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2025). The racial diversity among those who left—spanning Black, Asian, and White staff—suggests that the factors driving attrition were experienced across demographic lines rather than confined to any single racial group. This pattern aligns with broader findings that organizational climate, leadership practices, and working conditions often outweigh demographic variables as predictors of who stays and who leaves (Simon & Johnson, 2015). Taken together, the school's demographic profile, mission focus on college preparation, Black leadership, and predominantly Black staff created a setting in which high rates of staff departure would not have been predicted by the dominant patterns in the retention literature. The case therefore provides a valuable window into how internal climate dynamics can disrupt even those structural and demographic conditions generally associated with greater staff stability.

The Problem: Rapid Staff Attrition

Timeline of Staff Departures

All 10 staff members departed at the conclusion of the 2025–2026 academic year. Their simultaneous exit created an abrupt and concentrated loss of personnel rather than a gradual attrition pattern distributed across the year. The principal subsequently spent the entire summer recruiting and hiring placements for the 10 vacant positions. This compressed timeline meant that new staff entered the school with limited opportunity for structured onboarding or relationship-building with remaining colleagues before the start of the subsequent academic year.

Concentrated end-of-year departures of this magnitude are particularly disruptive. Research on teacher turnover demonstrates that schools experiencing high rates of simultaneous staff turnover face greater challenges in maintaining instructional coherence, institutional knowledge, and relational continuity than schools in which departures occur more evenly over time (Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). Remaining educators often experience heightened stress, diminished morale, and a sense of instability as institutional memory is lost, and new staff requires time to integrate. In a college preparatory context, such disruption carries additional consequences for students.

Manifestations of the Toxic Environment

The toxic organizational climate was a central factor precipitating the departure of the 10 staff members at the end of the 2025–2026 academic year. The climate shaped the daily professional space in ways that systematically eroded trust, equity, and psychological safety among educators. Faculty members reported pervasive resentment toward colleagues, fueled by perceptions of uneven effort and inconsistent professional standards. Simultaneously, staff expressed significant resentment toward the administration for its pattern of inaction—frequently described as sweeping situations under the rug—when interpersonal conflicts, performance concerns, or climate issues were raised. Rather than intervening constructively, leadership was experienced as avoidant, allowing problems to fester and reinforcing it, since adult concerns would not be addressed with seriousness or care.

A related manifestation was insufficient supervisory support combined with highly uneven accountability. Multiple educators observed that some teachers were effectively permitted to operate without meaningful oversight or consequence, while others experienced different expectations or scrutiny. This differential treatment—favoritism in the eyes of many staff—undermined any shared sense of fairness and professional norms. Supervisors were widely perceived as offering limited guidance, feedback, or relational care, leaving teachers feeling professionally isolated and unsupported. These dynamics align closely with research on toxic leadership and destructive organizational climate in educational settings. When leaders fail to enforce consistent expectations, address conflict equitably, or demonstrate genuine care for staff, relational trust deteriorates and voluntary turnover increases (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Simon & Johnson, 2015). Studies of school working conditions consistently identify administrative support, fairness, and collegial climate as among the strongest predictors of whether teachers remain or leave (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Simon & Johnson, 2015). Without psychological safety and equitable treatment, even demographically congruent settings can become environments that staff experience as untenable (Kholi, 2018). In this case, the interplay of inter-faculty resentment, administrative avoidance, lack of supervisory care, and differential treatment of teachers created cumulative conditions that rendered continued employment unsustainable for the 10 educators who departed.

Impact of Remaining Faculty and School Culture

The departure of 10 colleagues at the end of the year left the remaining staff to absorb increased responsibilities, cover transitional gaps, and navigate a disrupted professional community. Turnover at this scale typically intensifies workload, reduces opportunities for collaboration, and undermines the relational fabric that supports effective teaching and school improvement (Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). Remaining Educators often experience heightened stress, diminished morale, and a sense of instability as institutional memory is lost, and new staff require time to integrate.

In a college preparatory context, such disruption carries additional consequences for students. Continuity of adult relationships and shaped instructional practices is especially important for maintaining the rigorous academic culture and college-going support that define the school's mission. When a significant portion of the staff turns over at once, the school's capacity to sustain coherent programs, mentoring relationships, and a stable adult presence is compromised. Research consistently links elevated teacher turnover to negative effects on student achievement, school climates, and organizational effectiveness, effects that are often most pronounced in schools serving SOC (Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Simon & Johnson, 2015).

The summer-long hiring process, while necessary to fill the vacancies, further prolonged the period of instability. New staff arrived without the benefit of extended collaborative planning time with veterans, potentially slowing the rebuilding of trust and shared professional norms. Collectively, these dynamics illustrate how rapid, concentrated attrition both results from and reinforces a toxic climate, creating a cycle that strains those who remain and threatens the school's ability to fulfill its college preparatory purpose.

Theoretical Framework

This case is guided by interlocking theoretical perspectives on toxic and destructive leadership, organizational climate, relational trust, and the limits of demographic congruence in educational settings. Together, these frameworks help explain how a predominantly Black college preparatory school, led by a Black principal and a largely Black administrative team, could experience the rapid departure of 10 staff members at the end of a single academic year.

Toxic Leadership and Organizational Climate

Toxic or destructive leadership refers to repeated behaviors that undermine subordinates' motivation, well-being, or performance and, over time, damage the organization itself (Einarsen et al., 2007; Maral, 2026). In educational contexts, such leadership often manifests through favoritism, inconsistent accountability, conflict avoidance, a lack of genuine supervisory care, and the creation of psychologically unsafe climates (Snow et al., 2021; Şenol & Taş, 2025). Teachers working under these conditions frequently report diminished professional agency, lowered morale, inter-colleague resentment, and heightened intentions to leave (Snow et al., 2021; Maral, 2026).

Organizational climate—the shared perceptions of policies, practices, and interpersonal treatment—functions as a critical mediator between leadership behavior and staff outcomes. Research consistently identifies administrative support, fairness, and collegial relationships as among the strongest predictors of teacher retention (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Simon & Johnson, 2019). When leaders fail to address interpersonal problems, enforce consistent expectations, or demonstrate equitable care, relational trust erodes (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). The resulting climate can become characterized by resentment among colleagues, resentment toward inactive or preferential leadership, and a pervasive sense that concerns will be minimized or ignored. Psychological safety—the belief that one can take

interpersonal risks without fear of punishment or neglect—declines under these conditions, further accelerating attrition (Edmondson, 1999; Fleming et al., 2024).

Demographic Congruence and Internal Organizational Dynamics

A second strand of theory addresses the role of racial congruence. Empirical studies demonstrate that Black teachers are generally less likely to leave schools led by Black principals and those with a critical mass of same-race colleagues (Bartanen & Grissom, 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2025). Same-race leadership is associated with greater perceptions of cultural understanding, support, and belonging. These findings have informed recruitment and retention strategies to increase educator diversity. However, demographic alignment does not automatically produce healthy organizational climates. The present case illustrates a critical theoretical gap: internal leadership practices and interpersonal dynamics can generate toxicity that overrides the protective effects typically associated with racial congruence. In predominantly Black institutions, the absence of external racial hostility does not preclude the emergence of favoritism, uneven accountability, administrative avoidance, or eroded relational trust among staff who share racial identity. Organizational climate theory and relational trust frameworks therefore remain essential for explaining attrition even in demographically homogeneous settings (Bryk & Schneifer, 2002; Simon & Johnson, 2015). Collectively, these perspectives—toxic and destructive leadership, organizational climate, psychological safety, relational trust, and the contingent value of demographic congruence—provide the analytic lens for examining how a toxic professional environment developed and contributed to the simultaneous departure of ten staff members despite structural conditions that research would ordinarily predict as retention-enhancing.

Analysis and Discussion

Contributing Factors to Staff Exodus

The simultaneous departure of ten staff members at the conclusion of the 2025–2026 academic year cannot be adequately explained by external labor-market conditions or individual career decisions alone. Instead, the pattern of attrition points to a constellation of internal organizational factors that rendered continued employment untenable for a substantial portion of the faculty. Central among these factors was a toxic professional climate characterized by inter-faculty resentment, administrative avoidance of conflict, inconsistent accountability, differential treatment of staff, and a perceived lack of supervisory care and support.

Faculty resentment toward colleagues emerged as a recurring theme. Educators described an environment in which uneven professional standards and perceptions of favoritism fractured collegial relationships. When some teachers were perceived as operating with minimal oversight while others faced different expectations, inequity took root. This dynamic aligns with research demonstrating that perceived unfairness and inconsistent enforcement of norms undermine collaborative culture and

elevate turnover intentions (Simon & Johnson, 2015; Snow et al., 2021). In settings where trust among peers erodes, the social resources that ordinarily buffer the demands of teaching diminish, leaving educators more vulnerable to burnout and exit (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Compounding peer-level tension was widespread resentment directed at the administration. Staff reported that leadership frequently minimized or deferred addressing interpersonal conflicts and performance concerns–behaviors described as pushing situations under the rug. This pattern of avoidance is a recognized feature of destructive or toxic leadership in educational contexts. When leaders fail to intervene constructively, problems accumulate, psychological safety declines, and staff concludes that their professional concerns will not be taken seriously (Einarsen et al., 2007; Maral, 2026; Şenol & Taş, 2025). The resulting climate of unresolved tension contributes directly to voluntary attrition.

A third contributing factor was insufficient supervisory support combined with highly uneven accountability. Multiple accounts indicated that some teachers were effectively permitted to do whatever they wanted, while others experienced different levels of scrutiny or neglect. This kind of differential treatment signals organizational unfairness. Research on school working conditions consistently identifies administrative support, fairness, and equitable treatment as among the strongest predictors of whether teachers remain or leave (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Simon & Johnson, 2015). When supporters experience selection as selective and accountability as inconsistent, the relational contract between leaders and teachers frays. In the present case, the dynamics reached a critical Threshold at the end of the academic year, producing a concentrated wave of departures rather than staggered exits.

The racial composition of those who left– six Black, two Asian, and four White educators–further underscores that the drivers of attrition transcended any single demographic group. While research demonstrates that racial congruence among principals, colleagues, and teachers ordinarily reduces turnover among Black educators (Bartanen & Grissom, 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2025), this case illustrates that protective demographic effects can be overridden by a toxic internal climate. This exit of six Black staff members from a predominantly Black faculty under Black leadership is particularly instructive: it suggests that shared racial identity, while often beneficial, does not immunize a school against the corrosive effects of favoritism, avoidance, and eroded trust.

Leadership Practices and Cultural Climate

The leadership structure of the school–one Black principal supported by six Black assistant principals and two additional assistant principals–created conditions that research would ordinarily associate with enhanced retention. Same-race leadership has been linked to greater perceptions of cultural understanding, belonging, and support, and empirical studies in large urban systems have documented meaningful reductions in Black teacher turnover under Black principals (Bartanen & Grissom, 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2025). In NYC data, for example, the presence of a Black principal was associated with an approximately 14% reduction in Black teacher turnover (Rodriguez et al., 2025). The presence of

multiple Black assistant principals extended opportunities for same-race supervisory relationships across the administrative team.

Yet the staff lived experiences diverged sharply from these expected benefits. Leadership practices were characterized by difficult conversations, selective enforcement of expectations, and limited demonstration of care or support. These behaviors align with documented patterns of toxic and destructive leadership in schools, which include favoritism, lack of transparency, inconsistent accountability, and the creation of psychologically unsafe climates (Maral, 2026; Snow et al., 2021). When leaders fail to model equitable treatment or to address conflict directly, relational trust–the foundation of effective school improvement–erodes (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Without trust, even demographically congruent leadership teams can create climates that staff experience as demoralizing and unsustainable.

The cultural climate that emerged under these practices was marked by mutual resentment, diminished collaboration, and a sense that professional concerns would be minimized rather than resolved. Organizational climate theory posits that shared perceptions of fairness, support, and interpersonal treatment shape both individual well-being and collective performance (Simon & Johnson, 2015). In this case, the climate transmitted clear signals that differential treatment was tolerated and that accountability was uneven. Such signals undermine the psychological safety teachers need to invest fully in their work and relationships with colleagues (Edmondson, 1999; Fleming et al., 2024). The concentrated end-of-year departures can thus be understood as the cumulative outcome of a leadership-influenced climate that progressively depleted staff relational and professional resources.

Importantly, the summer-long hiring process that followed the departures extended the period of instability. New staff entered without extended opportunities for collaborative planning or relationship building with remaining colleagues, potentially slowing the Reconstruction of trust and shared norms. High-turnover schools frequently struggle to reconstitute coherent professional cultures precisely because the relational infrastructure that supports Improvement has been damaged (Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019).

Implications for Equity and Retention in African-American-Led Schools

The findings of this case study carry substantial implications for equity-oriented educational leadership and staff-retention efforts in schools led by Black principals and serving predominantly Black student populations. A growing empirical literature has established that racial congruence between principals and teachers– particularly for Black educators– is associated with lower turnover and stronger perceptions of support and belonging (Bartenen & Grissom, 2023; Rodriguez et al., 2026). In NYC data spanning nearly a decade, the presence of a Black principal was linked to an approximately 14% reduction in Black teacher turnover (Rodriguez et al., 2026). These patterns have informed Recruitment

and placement strategies intended to increase the presence of TOC in schools serving SOC and to leverage same-race leadership as a protective factor.

The school examined here demonstrates, however, that demographic alignment is a necessary but insufficient condition for healthy professional climates. Shared racial identity among the principal and majority-Black assistant principal team, a predominantly Black faculty, and a predominantly Black student body created structural conditions that the retention literature would ordinarily treat as advantageous. Those conditions did not prevent the simultaneous departure of 10 staff members–six of them self-identified as Black– at the close of a single academic year. The decisive factor was an internal organizational assignment marked by inter-faculty resentment, administrative conflict avoidance, inconsistent accountability, differential treatment of staff, and a perceived absence of supervisory care. These practices eroded relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) and psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999; Fleming et al., 2024), rendering continued employment professionally and personally unsustainable for a substantial portion of the faculty.

This pattern has several implications for equity. First, it unsettles any assumption that increasing the representation of Black leaders and teachers will, by itself, produce affirming working conditions. Representation remains both morally and empirically important; it does not automatically generate fairness, professional respect, or the belief that concerns will be taken seriously (Kohli, 2018; Simon & Johnson, 2015). When power is exercised unevenly inside racially congruent settings, the resulting harm can be especially demoralizing because it occurs among people who share identity and, ostensibly, a common mission. Staff may experience such climates as a rupture of expected solidarity, which can accelerate rather than buffer exit. Second, the attrition of TOC from a Black school under Black leadership results in the loss of human capital and of cultural and relational resources that SOC frequently rely upon. Concentrated teacher turnover disrupts instructional continuity, mentoring relationships, and college-going culture that defines a preparatory school's mission (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Ronfeldt et al., 2019). In urban college preparatory contexts, where students already navigate systemic educational inequities, the loss of experienced same-race adults can undermine the equity goals the institution was designed to advance. Climate-driven flight therefore functions as an internal Equity problem, not merely a human-resource inconvenience.

Third, the case illustrates that organizational toxicity is not solely a product of external racial hostility. Research has documented how racially hostile school climates drive TOC from the profession (Kohli, 2018). The present analysis shows that internal practices–favoritism, conflict avoidance, and uneven standards–can generate comparable demoralization even when external racial dynamics are less salient. In predominantly Black institutions (PBIs) and other minority-serving settings, the absence of intergroup racial hostility does not preclude destructive leadership behaviors or eroded adult relationships (Einarsen et al., 2007; Maral, 2026; Snow et al., 2021; Şenol & Taş, 2025). Organizational climate theory and relational trust Frameworks therefore remain essential for explaining retention even in demographically homogeneous schools (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Simon & Johnson, 2015). Fourth, leadership preparation and district support systems that emphasize culturally responsive practice and

demographic matching may underprepare principals to manage intra-group dynamics, favoritism, and climate deterioration within racially similar staffs. Equity work in Black-led schools must therefore extend beyond formal roles to how authority is exercised, how fairness is perceived, and whether adults experience the workplace as psychologically safe. Without that expansion, gains in representation can be offset by climate-driven losses that ultimately harm students.

Collectively, these implications recast staff climate as a first-order equity issue in PBIs and urban college-preparatory schools. Leaders, districts, and researchers concerned with retention cannot treat racial congruence as a substitute for relationally grounded, accountable, and consistent professional practice. The hidden costs of unaddressed toxicity–lost institutional knowledge, weakened college-readiness supports, and diminished adult well-being–fall most heavily on the students these schools exist to serve.

Recommendations

For School Leadership

School leaders serving Black-led and PBIs should treat organizational climate as a core equity and retention strategy, not a secondary operational concern. Several practices followed directly from the dynamics documented in this case. Leaders should establish, communicate, and consistently apply professional standards. Differential treatment– whether experienced as favoritism toward some colleagues or as neglect of others– signals organizational unfairness and fractures collegial trust. Principals and assistant principals can conduct regular, transparent reviews of supervision so that expectations, feedback, and consequences are applied equitably across staff (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Simon & Johnson, 2015). Avoidance of difficult conversations, frequently described in this case as pushing situations under the rug, should be replaced by structured, timely Intervention when interpersonal conflicts or performance concerns arise (Einarsen et al., 2007; Snow et al., 2021; Şenol & Taş, 2025). Consistency and accountability are equity practices in themselves.

Relational trust must be actively cultivated rather than assumed to follow from shared racial identity. Drawing on Bryk and Schneider (2002), administrators can invest in frequent, authentic interactions that communicate respect, personal regard, and competence. Supervisory relationships that offer guidance, recognition, and care––rather than evaluation alone–help restore the social resources that ordinarily buffer the demands of teaching. In settings where staff already perceive leadership as distant or preferential, visible demonstrations of equitable care are particularly important. Psychological safety requires deliberate organizational design. Leaders can implement regular, confidential climate assessments that measure perceptions of fairness, voice, interpersonal risk, and supervisory support (Edmondson, 1999; Fleming et al., 2024). Results should be shared with faculty and used to co-construct improvement plans, modeling that adult concerns will be taken seriously. Multiple, low-stakes channels for raising issues–and documented follow-through–counteract the belief that problems will be

minimized or ignored. When staff concludes that speaking up is futile or risky, exit becomes a rational response.

After addressing turnover, leaders should prioritize culture reconstruction rather than treating summer hiring as a purely logistical task. Robust onboarding extends collaborative planning time, and explicit community-building activities can help new and remaining staff establish shared professional norms before the subsequent academic year begins. High-turnover schools frequently struggle to reconstitute coherent cultures precisely because the relational infrastructure that supports improvement has been damaged (Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). Investing in that infrastructure is as important as filling vacancies. Leadership teams themselves require support. Districts and networks serving PBIs can provide coaching, peer networks, and professional learning focused on intra-group dynamics, Equitable supervision, conflict mediation, and recognition of toxic or destructive leadership patterns (Maral, 2026; Snow et al., 2021). If racial matching will automatically produce healthy adult cultures, it leaves Black principals without the tools needed when internal climate deteriorates. Intentional development of these capacities is an equity investment in both that stability and student opportunity.

For Future Research

This single-site case identifies a theoretical and empirical gap: the conditions under which racial congruence fails to yield the retention benefits documented in large-scale studies. Several lines of inquiry can strengthen the knowledge base and inform practice in Black-led schools. Qualitative and mixed-methods studies should examine the micro-processes–communication patterns, decision-making routines, conflict handling, and supervisory interactions–through which climate becomes toxic even when demographic alignment is high. Close analysis of how favoritism is perceived, how avoidance is enacted, and how staff interpret leadership silence would illuminate mechanisms that survey measures of climate often leave opaque. Comparative case studies of high-retention and high-turnover schools with similar racial compositions of leadership and staff would help isolate the organizational practices that most strongly differentiate outcomes.

Quantitative research using large urban administrative datasets could test interactions among principal race, staff racial composition, measures of leadership quality or climate, and teacher turnover. Such work would clarify when and for whom internal conditions moderate congruence effects (Bartanen & Grissom, 2023; Rodriguez et al., 2026). Incorporating school-level indicators of psychological safety, fairness, and administrative support (Flemming et al., 2024; Simon & Johnson, 2015) would allow researchers to move beyond demographic main effects toward more complete retention models. The role of assistant principals and distributed leadership teams also warrants focused study. In this case, the school was supported by eight assistant principals, six of whom were Black. Understanding how mid-level leaders contribute to, buffer, or amplify toxicity would produce more complete accounts of

school climate than principal-only models. Research on the alignment–or misalignment–of expectations and practices across an administrative team would be especially useful for leadership development.

Longitudinal studies linking concentrated, end-of-year staff turnover in college-preparatory schools to student outcomes–achievement, course-taking, college enrollment, and belonging–would quantify the costs of unaddressed toxicity for the students these institutions are designed to serve (Carver-Thomass & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Ronfeldt et al., 2013). Because college-preparatory missions depend on relational continuity and coherent adult cultures, the student-level consequences of simultaneous faculty loss may be particularly pronounced. Finally, scholarship on leadership in PBIs and other minority-serving institutions (MSIs) should integrate frameworks of toxic and destructive leadership (Einarsen et al., 2007; Maral, 20026; Şenol & Taş, 2025; Snow et al., 2021) alongside culturally responsive and equity-oriented models. Doing so would yield a more complete picture of the challenges facing Black educational leaders and would caution against treating racial congruence as a sufficient theory of staff retention. Research that takes intra-group power, fairness, and relational trust as seriously as representation will better serve both scholars and the schools they study.

Conclusion

This case study examined the rapid departure of 10 staff members from a predominantly Black college-preparatory school led by a Black principal and a largely Black administrative team. Despite structural conditions that research associates with improved retention– racial congruence among leaders, faculty, and students– the school developed a toxic professional climate categorized by inter-faculty resentment, administrative avoidance of conflict, inconsistent accountability, differential treatment, and eroded relational trust. These internal dynamics overrode the protective effects typically linked to demographic alignment and produced a concentrated wave of attrition at the end of one academic year. The analysis demonstrates that organizational climate and leadership practice are decisive for staff stability. Racial representation, while important, does not automatically generate psychological safety or professional respect. When leaders fail to address conflict, enforce equitable standards, or demonstrate consistent care, even demographically congruent settings can become untenable for educators (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Edmondson, 1999; Simon & Johnson, 2015). The racial diversity of those who left–six Black, two Asian, and four White educators–further indicates that the drivers of exit operated across demographic lines rather than being confined to any single group. The departure of six Black staff members from a predominantly Black faculty under Black leadership is especially instructive: shared identity does not immunize a school against the corrosive effects of favoritism, avoidance, and diminished trust (Bartanen & Grissom, 2023; Rodriguez et al., 2026).

The consequences extend beyond personal accounts. Concentrated turnover intensifies workload for those who remain, depletes institutional memory, and weakens the relational fabric that supports rigorous instruction and college-going supports (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Ronfeldt et al., 2013). Any school whose mission centers on expanding post-secondary access for SOC, such disruption is an equity problem as well as an organizational one. Unresolved toxicity therefore carries

hidden costs for the very students the institution exists to serve. For educational leaders, particularly those working in Black-led schools and other PBIs, the case offers a cautionary and actual lesson. Cultivating inclusive, affirming, and sustainable professional climates requires intentional, relationally grounded leadership that prioritizes the well-being of the adults charged with educating students. Addressing toxicity is not peripheral to equity work; it is central. Districts, preparation programs, and researchers should treat internal climate– fairness, psychological safety, consistent accountability, and supervisory care– as a first-order concern. Only then can the promise of racial congruence be realized in practice, and only then can urban college-preparatory schools retain the educators needed to fulfill their missions.

Declarations

Author Contribution

SDAS conceived and designed the study, collected and analyzed the data, wrote the original draft, and revised and approved the final manuscript.

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