

Research, Advocacy, Collaboration,
and Empowerment Mentoring Series

LEADING IN THE MIDST OF IT ALL

**Surviving and Thriving Through COVID-19
and Racial Reckonings**



Edited by

Sheree N. Alexander, Ed.D.
Aaron J. Griffen, Ph.D.
C. Dedra Williams, Ed.D.
Karen "Dr. K." Griffen, Ed.D.

Leading in the Midst of it All

Research, Advocacy, Collaboration, and Empowerment Mentoring Series

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Leading in the Midst of it All

**Surviving and Thriving Through
COVID-19 and Racial Reckonings**

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United Kingdom – North America – Japan
India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL

First edition 2026

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Cover photo: iStock and Mammuth

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80592-346-6 (Print hardback)
ISBN: 978-1-80592-348-0 (Print paperback)
ISBN: 978-1-80592-345-9 (Ebooks)
ISBN: 978-1-80592-347-3 (Epub)

Typeset by TNQ Tech
Cover design by TNQ Tech

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FOREWORD TO *LEADING IN THE MIDST OF IT ALL*

I became a teacher because I wanted to champion Black children and teach them to read. This career has taken more patience, humility, and vulnerability than I could have imagined. I'm so glad I took the long view. When I started as a seventh grade language arts teacher in Baltimore City in 1999, I had next to nothing. I knew even less. I didn't really understand teaching and learning and classroom management and culture and discipline and curriculum and being supervised and middle schoolers, etc. Twenty-four years later and now a professor, critical race theorist, and foundations of education scholar, my understandings of those things have deepened, widened, and become complicated. What remains is how disturbed I am by the extent to which schools, communities, educators, and students full of Black and Brown people are under-resourced, under-served, and dehumanized. Conventional wisdom holds that teaching is a thankless job. Having lived through this new world marked by COVID-19 since March of 2020, our society owes immense gratitude to the K-12 educators who have persisted in teaching, leading, guiding, and trying to navigate us through the terrain of an era of viral illness unseen for 100 years.

To every educator anywhere in the profession who picks up this book, thank you for the work you have done and will do. Thank you for being here, alive, healthy, bringing your best self or whatever self you have to bring to your school, your neighborhood, your community, your students. Thank you for dealing with COVID and your home lives and your private selves and still showing up every day professional and prepared to lead and love and push and encourage and cajole and challenge because that's what our students and colleagues and communities need and deserve. Thank you for making it. Thank you for surviving your own upbringing, your own education, your own experiences in this world, to make up your own mind and be here to live and teach and love another day.

Thank you for engaging this text. Thank you for beginning each school year with fresh ideas, new insights, and new energy. Thank you for finding those fresh ideas, insights, and energy today, next week, in November when you're tired, in March, when you're desperately looking for holiday break. Thank you for giving and doing your very best in the midst of our constantly changing educational, cultural, political, and technological landscapes. Thank you for continuing to learn, to teach, to stretch yourselves, our students, and our colleagues so that better is possible. Thank you for keeping yourselves grounded in community. Thank you for not being swayed or defined by or dictated to by the dominant discourse of deficits and lack. Thank you for seeing beyond what and how things seem. Thank you for being visionary leaders who teach students beyond your grade and content toward their future selves and their full humanity. Thank you for remembering that, regardless what it looks like for our young people, anything is possible.

Thank you for persisting in work greater than us all. Thank you for trying, failing, getting up, dusting yourself off, picking up your ego, and trying again. Thank you for trying 1,000 times before you get it right. Thank you for pressing, demanding the best and the most from yourselves, our students, and each other, regardless. Thank you for writing lesson plans, reading essays, grading papers, evaluating projects, calling parents, correcting behavior, sponsoring activities, doing lunch duty, morning duty, hall duty, holding coach class, conducting morning meetings and afternoon advisories. Thank you for giving more praise than criticism. Thank you for finding something good. Thank you for making opportunities available for all of our students, regardless of what some people may think they do or do not deserve. Thank you for working within your locus of control. Thank you for wanting to do well for and with your students. And our families. And our communities.

Thank you for your service, courage, humility, originality, leadership, achievement, and reflection. Sometimes, this work hurts. It can be painful to show our struggles. It can be hard to accept help. It can be taxing to give assistance. But thank you for pushing through the pain, for going one more day, for coaching one more student, for consulting with one more colleague, for meeting with one more parent. Thank you for leaning into the pain. Thank you for knowing the only way out is in. Thank you for knowing we don't have all the answers. Thank you for your willingness to pursue questions. Thank you for not separating yourselves from one another and walling yourselves off. Thank you for your constant inquiry and efforts to work together with each other, with families, with communities, with organizations, with colleges, with businesses, to bridge where students are and where they are going, even as we know not yet who they will be.

In her book, *Walking in Circles: The Black Struggle for School Reform*, Barbara Sizemore argued that successful school reform is usually short-lived because of the deliberate sabotage brought about by those who are deeply financially, politically, or racially invested in ineffective systems thriving.¹ This is even truer now in our COVID-19/ vaccine/ virtual schooling/ testing/ technocratic/ lock down/ crumbling infrastructures/ crazy inflation haziness. Thank you for pushing against deliberate sabotage, willful indifference, ineptitude, and hopelessness. Thank you for working beyond yourselves, your experiences, what it looks like, what it feels like, what people believe is possible, beyond your results, beyond the rhetoric, beyond the divisiveness, beyond the demonizing of teachers, beyond the spectacle and surveillance of classrooms and test scores, beyond what you can imagine. Thank you for dreaming. Thank you for being your better self, using your higher mind, seeing the possibility in each of your students, using your asset lenses, for seeing the good in students even when they are showing us their worst. Thank you for modeling for your students what it looks like to have love and hope and possibility.

Thank you for having mercy and compassion. For your students. For your colleagues. For parents. For neighbors. For yourself. Thank you for asking questions. Thank you for questioning everything about yourselves—where you're from, what you believe, what you were taught, how you were taught, what is true, what needs to happen to make the world ready for our students and our students ready to make a better world. Thank you for schooling the marginalized, the dispossessed, those to whom an education debt is owed, the Black, the Brown, the immigrant, the poor, the most school dependent.

Thank you for wrestling with how to make our students ready to face a world beyond wherever they are. Beyond wherever you are. Beyond the United States of America. Beyond people's conceptions of their Brown and Black bodies and minds. Beyond the world that is so often not ready for their genius or their questions. Thank you for working to make our students prepared to meet the world full of knowledge and full of themselves, proud of who they are, what they know, what they can do, and where they are going, regardless of the naysayers. Thank you for looking for the interests, inquisitiveness, and genius of every student we teach. Thank you for giving them the skills, the tools, the content, the structure, the language to examine, inquire, analyze, to build, to tear down, to create, to recreate, to adjust, to reflect, to move forward, and never forget to look back.

As you engage in the ideas advanced in this text and read the work of educators across various aspects of education, hold fast to what bell hooks (1994, p. 13) wrote about we who endeavor in this work—

That learning process comes easiest to those of us who believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely

to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin.²

Our work is necessary and sacred. COVID-19 has demanded we find space for grace and grief, for protest and demands, for joy and justice, for health and care, all as we teach and lead. Well-studied, well-prepared, well-equipped, healthy, and well-rested, use this text as a guide so we can amend the work of schooling in education systems across this nation to center the marginalized, those who are always the most harmed in this nation, those who consistently have the least. Thank you for being the best of our ancestors and elders: for being educators who only have themselves and their communities and for making something beautiful and necessary to both anchor our youth and move our communities forward, simultaneously. Thank you for making something in the dark out of not much at all.

Camika Royal, PhD
December 2023
Morgan State University

NOTES

1. Sizemore, B. (2004). *Walking in circles: The Black struggle for school reform*. Third World Press.
2. hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to Transgress*. Routledge.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**Sheree N. Alexander
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I would like to thank my husband Leon E. Alexander, II for ALWAYS believing in my me, and supporting my dreams, and my vision for creating safe learning spaces for little Black girls just like me. I want to thank my mother, Barbara A. Cook for always listening, for NEVER silencing her little Black girl, and for being my very best girl. I love you both and hope that you are smiling from heaven and continue to always watch over me.

I would like to thank Dr. Aaron Griffen and Dr. Donna Y. Ford for their unwavering support and patience with ensuring that his work came to fruition. I experienced the loss of my uncle Joseph Morrel, who was a father figure, my mother, and my husband of 27 years while compiling this work. Both Dr. Griffen and Dr. Ford provided comfort and refused to allow me to abandon this most important work. I want to also thank my therapist, Ms. Mona Williams, who taught me that grief presents differently for every individual and is a process. And finally, I would like to thank my RM family who has always had my back. There really is no place like home.

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INTRODUCTION

Sheree N. Alexander
Rowan University, USA

The immediate removal of staff and students from schools in March of 2020, changed the landscape of education forever. School leaders were forced to scramble and pivot to remote learning without all the necessary systems in place. Students and families that relied on in-person schooling not only for instruction and socialization, but also for meals, safety, and security as many in urban school districts do, were faced with immediate challenges that were not easy to address. Yet, addressing those needs were a must. In an already overtaxed health system where racial disparities already existed, we were now faced with disproportionate illness and deaths because of Covid-19.

Simultaneously, the nation was facing the upcoming presidential election, still reeling from the fractured race relations spurred by the then president and his constituents. Albeit the Black Lives Matter movement was kick started in 2013 by the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012, the media coverage of Black carnage at the hands of white law enforcement and vigilantes became regularly expected during the morning or evening news. Communities were still feeling the tragic loss of Eric Gardner and Tamir Rice in 2014, and then Freddie Gray and Sandra Bland in 2015. Many probably did not realize we lost Alton Sterling on July 5th and then Philando Castile the very next day on July 6th of 2016. Just weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic hit the nation and shut parts of the world down, on February 23rd Ahmaud Arbery was killed and then on March 13th of 2020, Breonna Taylor was fatally shot. Just as COVID-19 moved from an epidemic to a pandemic in the Spring of 2020, so did the killing of unarmed Black people.

School leaders of color now with the task of navigating multiple pandemics and leading elementary, middle, and high schools as well as institutions of higher learning need immediate attention. Leading institutions of learning is rewarding and necessary work for our field, for our students and for our communities and doing so effectively requires acknowledgment of our struggles, adequate support for our staff and students and ultimately our self-care. This volume addresses the many challenges we face as school leaders of color and exposes some of the great lengths we must undertake to do so. I hope that if you find your experience in any of these chapters, you can identify and find comfort in knowing that you are not alone, and we all are *Leading in the Midst of it All*.

SECTION 1

TEACHERS LEADING IN THE MIDST OF IT ALL

C. Dedra Williams
Atlantic City Public Schools, USA

INTRODUCTION

The vital role of teachers of color leading during these uncertain and unprecedented times is a topic that emphasizes the crucial contribution of teachers of color in today's society. These educators play an important role in shaping the perspectives of students from diverse backgrounds and promoting equality in education. Teachers are critical in spreading knowledge, making them essential members of society. As a dedicated educator, I am thrilled to present this informative set of chapters.

These chapters are written by educators of color and provide insightful reflections on various events in the United States, including the Black Lives Matter Movement, the 2020 Presidential Elections, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the 2021 attack on the Capitol. This introductory summary of chapters demonstrates significant evidence of their dedication and focus as educators despite the constant challenges they have faced due to social and political issues across America over the years. The collection of these chapters reflects the competence and dedication of teachers of color in education. These chapters transcend traditional teaching practices by identifying teachers' comprehensive and diverse responsibilities in supporting their fellow professionals, communities, and parents. Therefore, as you read through these chapters, you are welcome to experience their wealth of knowledge and compassion for not only their students but their communities.

These chapters demonstrate the approach with which teachers of color conscientiously addressed these challenging issues, ranging from the 2020 presidential elections to the Black Lives Matter Movement and the Capitol Riots. Throughout these difficult situations, their contribution reflects their empathy and dedication to their students and their respective communities. These pages reflect the resilience of teachers of color, mastered through great adversity and not mere stories of victory or survival. These chapters identify with stories of educators who defied every odd to become a symbol of hope for their communities as they identified with teaching as a means to advocate for racial inclusivity and social justice.

Therefore, this collection demonstrates the plight of educators who dared to make a change using their profession. One notable element that defines this collection is that education does not necessarily involve exchanging information but rather the development and importance of humanity. Despite the adversities faced, these educators have mastered their responsibilities of mentoring young students while also standing as the pillars of their society.

As the world becomes more divisive and polarizing, these teachers have become a great source of strength because of their courage to transcend racial, social, and economic challenges. Therefore, the main objective of the voice of teachers of color is to emphasize the importance of their impact and presence in the education system and their commitment to following federal guidelines that define their professional practice. The chapters in this book provide a unique opportunity to explore the experiences and role of teachers of color, characterized by their competence and authenticity, which is evident in every chapter. This collection of insights will help shape the future of the American education system. Leading in the midst of all during competing pandemics shows that educators can adapt to challenging situations and provide the necessary support to their students. It requires excellent resilience, empathy, and creativity to navigate these unprecedented times and ensure that learning continues safely and effectively.

Despite the many obstacles that they face, educators remain committed to their mission of helping students thrive and succeed.

These teachers of color offer valuable insights and first-hand experiences on the importance of having a positive attitude and continuously learning throughout one's life. Through their teachings, they demonstrate the significance of not only academic knowledge, but also of cultivating a growth mindset that embraces challenges and seeks out new opportunities for personal and professional development. By sharing their unique perspectives, these educators inspire their students to overcome obstacles and pursue their goals with passion, resilience, and a deep sense of purpose.

CHAPTER 1

LEADING AMID COVID-19 IN EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 Pandemic has forever changed education. Educators had to learn all the new educational platforms to deliver quality education at its onset (Hoofman & Secord, 2021). The goal for educators became making the transition to remote learning appear seamless, business as usual. The approaching school year was going to be different, trying, and unprecedented. For me, the question became, how would I be as effective by a camera as I am in-person? How would I let my students know they matter to me via the Internet? Any educator will tell you that education is about relationships. How would I form relationships, real connections, with my students on camera?

THE EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES HIGHLIGHTED BY THE PANDEMIC: A REFLECTION ON TEACHERS, STUDENTS, AND TECHNOLOGY ACCESS

In April 2020, educators worldwide were acknowledged for their commitment, flexibility, and creativity. Professional educators became heroes as parents were “locked down” with their children and assisting them with assignments. Time and time again, parents were interviewed via Zoom on

every news channel and could not thank their children's teachers enough for the job they do every day (celebrity parents were the biggest fans of teachers). I felt appreciated for once amid all the global fear and uncertainty. People outside of the profession were praising teachers. But what about the students? How did they feel? Was this new form of education effective? Were they learning? It became easy for students to tune out. Many did.

According to [Betthäuser et al. \(2023\)](#), what became apparent throughout the world was the continuing educational inequalities that exist. These inequalities have multiple contributing factors, but socio-economic factors are at the forefront. The pandemic ripped the Band-Aid off the wound that needed sutures in education. The inequalities in education have existed since *Plessy v. Ferguson* ([Lipsitz, 2015](#)). Today it is not about old-fashioned textbooks; the difference lies in access to technology. The Digital Divide that exists in Urban educational settings has to be addressed. Urban students were "tuning out" not because they wanted to but because they did not have the required access to the Internet and computers, especially Chrome books. My district distributed Chrome Books to every student, grades 1–12. However, students reported not having internet access, so what good was a Chrome Book? Major companies stepped in to provide hot spots. For the most part, the problem was solved.

TEACHING AND LEARNING AMID A PANDEMIC: NAVIGATING UNCERTAINTY, DISCONNECTION, AND SKILL LOSS

I remember calling my students in April 2020. After being out of school for three weeks, they were happy to talk to me. Many expressed fear and anxiety about the unknown. They were scared but wanted to return to school. They felt helpless. Some even said they missed me. I ended every call with, "Take care. Be safe. See you soon." This was completely uncharted territory. No one knew exactly what was happening. I felt the same way as my students; scared and helpless. We were only supposed to be home for another two weeks. It would be four months before I entered my school building again. September 2020 was unlike any other first day of school, with no students.

Most students would not return to the building until September 2021 (Less than 400 students returned to the building under the Hybrid model, electing to remain fully remote during the 2020–21 school year). When students returned to in-person learning, there seemed to be a sense of uncertainty. For the most part, students were happy to be in school, especially seniors. Once again, the beginning of this school year was unlike any other. The immediate concern for educators was establishing norms and assessing students' skills. Mainly, ascertain how significant, if any, skills were lost after a year of remote learning. In a district that is more than 70% composed of Black and Brown students, any loss of skills is significant.

Some students reported that they did not like remote learning and did minimal school work. While others reported, they preferred remote learning because they were at home and did not have to get up early. All assignments were posted in Google Classroom, which enabled students who did not join the live calls to complete school work at their convenience. The structure and daily routines of school were foreign. Overall, my students were disconnected. I was disconnected as well.

On the first day of school, I greeted all my students at the door for twenty-seven years, welcoming them to a new school year. By the end of the first week, I knew all of their names. I knew what they looked like, and by the second week, I knew whether they had any siblings also attending high school. By the end of September, I had begun to build a personal relationship. Last year, most of my students were initials in a box on my computer screen. Those students who returned to the building in November 2020 wore masks, making it difficult for me to see their faces. I felt no personal connection. I was just teaching the material as best as I could under the circumstances. Many students have approached me this year to finally introduce themselves, saying they were in one of my classes last year. It was the first time I could not identify most of my former students by sight or name. I did not know them. Like the students, I had lost an entire school year.

CHALLENGES OF RETURNING TO IN-PERSON LEARNING: TRANSITIONING FROM INDEPENDENT REMOTE LEARNING TO STRUCTURED CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

Students had spent an entire school year, for the most part, on their schedule. “Tuning in” when they felt like; submitting assignments when they had time. I completed work at 2 a.m. There seemed to be little accountability. Students now had to give up their independence to return to a bell schedule and school and classroom rules. In addition, the district adopted block scheduling at the high school, which extended classroom time, increased the daily course load, and shortened the lunch period. Coupled with the Covid-19 mandated safety requirements, schools, students, and staff returned to a completely changed environment. It was a tough transition back to school.

The hardest part for most teachers was separating students from their phones. Students report that it is easier to “zone out” and pick up their phones than before the pandemic. It was easy to be on their phones during remote learning; teachers did not know they were not paying attention. One student stated, “Now we are conditioned to being on our phones.” Their cellular devices had been their constant companion for eighteen months. Instagram and Tik Tok were their friends. Their phones had become their only way to communicate and socialize with their peers.

Most importantly, they had been their teachers. They could find everything they wanted to learn, do and know on these two platforms. Social media was more interesting than history class. When students returned to school, they had to put their phones down. I spent September trying to get them to disconnect. Sometimes, I felt like I was the distraction.

ADJUSTING TO THE NEW NORMAL: NAVIGATING THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING AND LEARNING DURING THE PANDEMIC

By December 2021, staff and students were in a heightened state of alert, waiting for the school to shut down again. As Covid-19 cases began to increase, everyone began preparing for a closure; our return to normalcy may end. Staff and students prepared for a return to remote learning. I had finally settled my students back into a routine and believed remote learning would ruin what we had established. I dreaded going back. But was optimistic that this time it would be different. My students knew me already, and we had already formed a bond. Covid-19 has changed the landscape of instruction. Everyone knew that if we did close school temporarily, this time, we were prepared. Fortunately, we could stay open when many schools decided to learn remotely for two weeks after the Winter recess.

This school year has been a rebuilding year. Re-establishing the norms. I have noticed a change in our students. Many of the Freshman and Sophomore students are immature. I can only assume that this results from losing a “normal” school year, preparing for high school, and the end-of-the-year visits to their new buildings. They were seventh and eighth graders when schools closed in March 2020. Educators have had to address issues concerning appropriate behavior in school. Behavior that had not been an issue pre-Covid-19 in high schools, like running in the hallways and fighting. The discipline referrals are overwhelmingly freshman and sophomore students.

THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL MEDIA ON EDUCATION AND CURRENT EVENTS AWARENESS AMIDST THE PANDEMIC

Despite the problems that educators and students have experienced since the pandemic, I am optimistic that the change in education is not negative. Many educators had to implement and embrace the use of technology in the classroom finally fully. Teachers could no longer just sit behind a desk, write the assignments on the board, and collect them at the end of class.