

TRANSFORMING EDUCATION THROUGH
CRITICAL LEADERSHIP, POLICY AND PRACTICE



Reimagining School Leadership



Sustaining Improvement
Through and Beyond
Uncertainty



DAVID E. DEMATTHEWS
SHARON D. KRUSE

Reimagining School Leadership

TRANSFORMING EDUCATION THROUGH CRITICAL LEADERSHIP, POLICY AND PRACTICE

Series editors: Stephanie Chitpin, Sharon D. Kruse and Howard Stevenson

Transforming Education Through Critical Leadership, Policy and Practice is based on the belief that those in educational leadership and policy-constructing roles have an obligation to educate for a robust critical and democratic polity in which citizens can contribute to an open and socially just society. Advocating for a critical, socially just democracy goes beyond individual and procedural concerns characteristic of liberalism and seeks to raise and address fundamental questions pertaining to power, privilege, and oppression. It recognizes that much of what has gone under the name of “transformational leadership” in education seeks to transform very little, but rather it serves to reproduce systems that generate structural inequalities based on class, gender, race, (dis)ability, and sexual orientation.

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Reimagining School Leadership: Sustaining Improvement Through and Beyond Uncertainty

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Contents

List of Figures and Tables	vii
About the Editors	ix
About the Contributors	xi
Chapter 1 The Challenge and Promise of Reimagining School Leadership	1
<i>Sharon D. Kruse and David E. DeMatthews</i>	
Chapter 2 Building and Sustaining Improvement in Disruptive Times: School Leadership in Aotearoa New Zealand	13
<i>Michalis Constantinides</i>	
Chapter 3 New Approaches to Complex Challenges: Leadership That Matters	31
<i>Deidre M. Le Fevre</i>	
Chapter 4 Reimagining Leadership for Symmetry: A Framework for Embedding Mutual Respect Into School Improvement Efforts	49
<i>Whitney M. Hegseth</i>	
Chapter 5 Critically Reflexive School Leadership and the Racial-Discipline Gap: Leading for Racial Justice	71
<i>Conor L. Scott and Melinda M. Mangin</i>	
Chapter 6 “But How Will This Improve Outcomes?” Tensions and Lessons of Improvement During a Racial Equity Transformation at Copley Public Schools	89
<i>Patricia M. Virella</i>	

Chapter 7 Leading Through Climate Disasters and Environmental Injustice: Past, Present, and Future	103
<i>Megan Rauch Griffard, Diamond Ebanks and Jacob D. Skousen</i>	
Chapter 8 Mindful Leadership: Cultivating Awareness, Wisdom, and Connection	133
<i>Sharon D. Kruse and David E. DeMatthews</i>	
Chapter 9 Conclusion: Reflections and Lessons Learned	151
<i>David E. DeMatthews and Sharon D. Kruse</i>	
Index	159

List of Figures and Tables

Chapter 4

Fig. 4.1.	A Framework for Examining Interactions Between Schools and Mutual Respect in Classrooms.	52
-----------	--	----

Chapter 7

Fig. 7.1.	Practical Steps to Lead Through Disaster.	125
-----------	---	-----

Chapter 4

Table 4.1.	Definitions and Examples of Mutual Respect in Practice.	53
------------	---	----

Table 4.2.	Interrelated Priorities When Leading for Symmetry.	59
------------	--	----

Chapter 7

Table 7.1.	Scholarship on the Student Outcomes Following a Natural Disaster.	107
------------	---	-----

Table 7.2.	Scholarship on the Role of School Leadership Following a Natural Disaster.	113
------------	--	-----

Chapter 8

Table 8.1.	Burnout and Mindfulness Contrasted.	137
------------	-------------------------------------	-----

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About the Editors

David E. DeMatthews, PhD, is an Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy at the University of Texas at Austin and holds a courtesy appointment in the Department of Special Education. Prior to arriving at UT-Austin, DeMatthews was an Assistant Professor at the University of Texas at El Paso. He began his career in education working as a teacher, campus leader, and district administrator in Baltimore City Public Schools and the District of Columbia Public Schools. DeMatthews' research focuses on equitable and inclusive school improvement, with an emphasis on leadership and policy. More specifically, he aims to understand how districts and schools create equitable and inclusive schools at the intersections of race, social class, language, and other markers of identity. Given the importance of stable school leadership to school improvement processes, he has also cultivated a stream of research focused on principal career pathways, job-related stress and burnout, and turnover. He has published over 150 research articles in academic journals, book chapters, research reports, and editorials in media outlets. DeMatthews' research has been published in *Educational Researcher*, *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *AERA Open*, *Teachers College Record*, *Educational Policy*, *Journal of Educational Administration*, *Urban Education*, *Journal of School Leadership*, *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, and *Leadership and Policy in Schools*. DeMatthews authored several books, including, *Community Engaged Leadership for Social Justice: A Critical Approach in Urban Schools* with Routledge. He regularly appears as a commentator on education policy issues in national and regional media outlets. DeMatthews' work and ideas have been featured in prominent media outlets including *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *Associated Press*, *ABC News*, *Education Week*, *The Hill*, *The Dallas Morning News*, *Houston Chronicle*, and other regional outlets.

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About the Contributors

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Diamond Ebanks, PhD, earned her Doctorate from the Environment, Ecology and Energy Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her community-based research focuses on the intersection of race, social vulnerability, and the movement of water, including both excess water (flooding) and the lack thereof (drought). Her areas of focus in research, teaching, and service are: environmental justice, race and disasters, qualitative methods, and diversity and equity. In her research, she seeks to understand the different ways marginalized communities advocate against vulnerability-making processes from outside influences and top-down “solutions.” In the environmental classes she teaches, she asks students to identify the ways their identities – visible or invisible – contribute to how they understand and respond to different environmental issues. In her advocacy, she leverages the resources and privileges she has so they can be best used by others in their community struggles.

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Deidre M. Le Fevre, PhD, is a Professor in educational leadership at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. She began her career teaching in elementary and secondary schools in New Zealand and the United Kingdom before moving into academia. Her Doctorate is from the University of Michigan and she previously held positions at the University of Michigan and Washington State University, USA. Dr Le Fevre is currently the Academic Director for graduate programs in educational leadership at the University of Auckland where she leads a team of international researchers focusing on leadership, policy, and schooling improvement. She has led major international research grants focusing on leadership, equity, professional learning, and organizational improvement and serves on several international journal editorial boards. Dr Le Fevre has had the privilege of supporting many exceptional leaders across sectors and countries. She is committed to improving education. Her current research foci include the development of leaders' interpersonal capabilities, promoting effective process of change, and enabling professional learning that has a positive impact. She has published extensively and enjoys the ongoing challenge of seeking to understand the complexities of learning, teaching, leadership, and organizational improvement.

Melinda M. Mangin, PhD (she/her), is a Professor in the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers University where she teaches and conducts research related

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Conor L. Scott is a practicing school administrator and doctoral candidate in the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers University. His research examines culturally responsive school leadership, the relationship between educational policy and school administration, and the role that school leaders play in alternately reproducing and dismantling inequities in school. Mr Scott has been an educator for more than 12 years. He has held roles as a social studies teacher, learning disabilities teacher-consultant, supervisor of special services, and assistant principal. Mr Scott employs critical race theory as a lens for understanding, critiquing, and improving educational systems, structures, and practices. As a researcher and future professor, Mr Scott aims to mobilize the knowledge needed to build more equitable school environments.

Jacob D. Skousen, EdD, earned his Doctorate from Boise State University in 2015 and joined the UNLV faculty UNLV in 2019. He also has a Master of Arts degree in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in bilingual education, and a Master of Education degree in Educational Leadership and Administration. Dr Skousen is an Assistant Professor in educational policy and leadership in the Department of Educational Psychology, Leadership, and Higher Education. Prior to UNLV, Dr Skousen spent three years as an Assistant Professor in educational leadership and policy studies at the University of Northern Colorado. As a researcher, having had 15 years as a practitioner in P-12 education, as a teacher, instructional coach, and principal, he works to bridge theory and practice. Dr Skousen has a research agenda focused on leadership development and equity.

Patricia M. Virella PhD is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at Montclair State University. Dr Virella's research focuses on implementing equity-oriented leadership through leader responses, organizational transformation, and preparation. Dr Virella also studies equity-oriented crisis leadership examining how school leaders can respond to crises without further harming marginalized communities.

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Chapter 1

The Challenge and Promise of Reimagining School Leadership

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Abstract

This introductory chapter underscores the urgent need to reimagine school leadership in the face of unprecedented challenges and uncertainties, including the COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing struggles for racial justice, and declining trust in public institutions. The chapter argues that traditional, top-down leadership approaches no longer sufficiently meet the complex needs of students, families, and communities and advocates for paradigm shift toward more collaborative, adaptive, and equity-centered leadership practices. Leadership practices are suggested that build inclusive school communities, foster a culture of continuous learning, and prioritize the holistic well-being of every student are highlighted as crucial. Readers are challenged to rethink the very purpose and goals of education, moving beyond narrow measures of academic achievement to encompass the development of the whole child. Three key themes are introduced: (1) school characteristics and structures for facing future challenges, (2) leadership practices to initiate and support new organizational perspectives, and (3) innovative school organizations addressing crises and implications. The chapter asserts that transforming school leadership requires a fundamental rethinking of the structures, policies, and incentives that shape the work of educational leaders. Therefore, school leaders must be equipped with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to lead for social justice, build culturally responsive school communities, and create transformative spaces where all students can thrive. This bold vision requires leaders to approach their work with humility, curiosity, and courage as they navigate the complexities of educational leadership in the 21st century.

Keywords: Equity; adaptability; school transformation; education leadership; cultural responsiveness

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing struggles for racial justice, and a growing sense of mistrust in public institutions have created significant barriers for school leaders in their efforts to improve schools. The sudden shift to remote learning during the pandemic exposed and exacerbated existing inequities in access to technology, internet connectivity, and supportive learning environments at home (Wharton-Beck et al., 2024; Zhao & Watterston, 2021). Additionally, the disproportionate impact of the virus on low-income communities and communities of color highlighted systemic health disparities and the need for schools to provide comprehensive support services beyond academics (Gee et al., 2023; Wharton-Beck et al., 2024). The racial justice protests of 2020, sparked by the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other Black Americans, brought systemic racism and police brutality to the forefront, prompting many school leaders to reevaluate their approaches to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Furthermore, declining trust in public institutions, including schools, has made it more challenging for leaders to build consensus and support for improvement initiatives among students, families, and community members (Kavanagh et al., 2020). In the face of unprecedented challenges and uncertainties, it has become increasingly clear that the top-down, hierarchical, and compliance-oriented models of leadership that have long dominated our schools are no longer sufficient to meet the complex needs of our students, families, and communities. However, the current context also provides an important opportunity to critically consider and reimagine the future of school leadership.

The disruption caused by the pandemic has highlighted the need for more flexible, adaptable, and resilient leadership practices that can respond effectively to rapidly changing circumstances. The renewed focus on racial justice has underscored the importance of culturally responsive and antiracist leadership approaches that prioritize equity and address the unique needs and experiences of marginalized students and families. The erosion of trust in public institutions has created an urgent imperative for school leaders to engage in authentic community engagement, build strong relationships with stakeholders, and foster a sense of shared purpose and collective responsibility for student success. In this volume, we call for a reimagination of school leadership as a collaborative, adaptive, and equity-centered endeavor that prioritizes building collective capacity, fostering inclusive school communities, and addressing the unique needs and experiences of marginalized students and families. We contend this requires a fundamental rethinking of the goals and purposes of education, beyond narrow measures of academic achievement, to encompass the holistic development and well-being of every student.

We assert that while school leadership is critical to advancing student achievement and other educational equity initiatives, contemporary approaches

to leadership and improvement are increasingly insufficient in a rapidly changing and unpredictable world. The research has long contended that traditional top-down, hierarchical leadership models that prioritize standardization, compliance, and accountability are ill-suited to the complex challenges facing schools today (Leithwood, 2021; Marshall, 1995; Murphy & Meyers, 2008). Instead, as researchers (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Rodela & Rodriguez-Mojica, 2020; Santamaría & Jean-Marie, 2014) have argued, school leaders must embrace more collaborative, distributed, and adaptive leadership practices that empower teachers, students, and families to cocreate solutions and drive continuous improvement. This requires a shift toward more relational, trust-based, and community-centered approaches to leadership that prioritize building collective capacity, fostering a sense of belonging and inclusivity, and leveraging the diverse strengths and perspectives of all members of the school community. At the heart of this transformation lies a recognition that schools are not just places of learning, but also vital spaces of belonging, healing, and empowerment (Allen et al., 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Yosso, 2005). We contend, as do the chapter authors in this volume that transforming schools means actively working to dismantle the systemic barriers and biases that have historically marginalized certain groups of students, and intentionally cultivating a culture of care, compassion, and mutual respect. To do this, school leaders must engage in ongoing self-reflection and growth, confronting their own biases and blind spots and developing the cultural competence and humility needed to lead across differences. Furthermore, they must also be willing to share power and decision-making with students, families, and community members, recognizing that true progress can only be achieved through authentic collaboration and partnership.

It is imperative that educators critically consider current conceptions of school leadership and school improvement throughout the US and around the world with a focus on leading through uncertainty, building sustainability, and advancing student experiences and outcomes beyond narrow quantitative outcome measures such as test scores, graduation rates, and college admission rates. In this volume, we highlight the need to conceptualize innovative frameworks for schoolwork to develop a societal mode of growth that can better recognize and address the complexities of our times. Emerging from how schools' function in uncertainties and emergencies, the chapters explore alternative and innovative trajectories of schools as organizations within their local and regional systems. Of course, transforming school leadership is not just about individual leaders and their practices; it also requires a fundamental rethinking of the structures, policies, and incentives that shape the work of educational leaders. Too often, the pressure to improve test scores, raise graduation rates, and compete in a market-driven educational landscape can distract leaders from the deeper work of building inclusive, equitable, and transformative school communities (DeMatthews, 2018; Rodela & Rodriguez-Mojica, 2020).

To truly reimagine school leadership, leaders must also reimagine the systems and contexts in which leaders operate, creating the conditions and support structures that enable them to lead in more holistic, adaptive, and justice-oriented ways.

Recent contributions to the educational leadership literature have highlighted the need for attention to be paid to the role of leadership within and among diverse school contexts and increasing diversity within the student population (Bass, 2020; Kohli, 2018, 2019; Liang & Liou, 2018; Miller et al., 2011; Rodela & Rodriguez-Mojica, 2020; Santamaría & Jean-Marie, 2014). This research extends and, in many ways, challenges a long-standing tradition of leadership studies that have privileged narratives framed around primary leadership functions. These functions include providing instructional guidance for educators to ensure student growth and learning (Leithwood et al., 2004, Portin et al., 2009), creating and promoting a positive culture built on trust and one that creates a sense of belonging (Leithwood et al., 2020; Supovitz et al., 2010), creating systems that are shared and collaborative (Seashore Louis et al., 2010; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008), distributive in nature (Cieminski, 2018; Knoeppel & Rinehart, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2004), transformational (Avolio et al., 2009; Bush, 2015; Day et al., 2016), and transformative (Shields, 2010). Yet, while this important and deep literature that has built a strong foundation of knowledge concerning the role of leadership in school improvement, this literature has not sufficiently addressed the limits of traditional approaches to instructional leadership and approaches that do not fully consider the multiple identities of students and the multiple experiences and outcomes that are important to school.

These limitations are particularly salient in the current moment, as school leaders face a myriad of challenges including the ongoing impact of the pandemic, continued racial injustice, and declining trust in public institutions. It must be emphasized that this means rethinking accountability systems that prioritize narrow measures of academic achievement over more holistic indicators of student and school success. To do so requires investing in the professional development and support structures that enable leaders to engage in ongoing learning, reflection, and growth (Kruse, 2023). And it means fostering greater collaboration and partnership between schools, families, and community organizations, recognizing that the work of education is a shared responsibility that extends beyond the walls of the classroom (Auerbach, 2010; DeMatthews, 2018; Khalifa, 2012).

Target Audience and Key Themes

This volume is primarily for education leadership researchers, faculty, graduate students, and school and district leaders seeking to better understand the context, challenges, and opportunities of school leadership in the present and future. The volume is part of the series, *Transforming Education Through Critical Leadership, Policy and Practice*. The series is based on the belief that those in educational leadership and policy-constructing roles have a moral obligation to educate for a robust critical and democratic citizenry, so that citizens may contribute to an open and fair society unafraid to critique different forms of contemporary colonial and neoliberal practices, while, at the same time, proposing alternatives consistent with a critical, socially just democracy. The series aims to publish work

that challenges and offers alternatives to the excessive individualism, reductionism, standardization, deficit, and narrowly pragmatic neoliberal agenda that has increased marginalization and disengagement in education.

The content of this book responds to the series challenge and spans multiple contexts within the US and around the world and provides unique insights into how school leaders navigate the complexities of their contexts in ways that promote equity and sustainability. Drawing from international voices, the volume covers three key themes: (1) school characteristics and structures for facing future challenges, (2) leadership practices to initiate and support new organizational perspectives, and (3) innovative school organizations addressing crises and implications. These themes underscore a need for adaptable school structures, forward-thinking leadership approaches, and creative organizational models that can navigate uncertainty and crisis. Moreover, these themes suggest that the future of school leadership must be grounded in a commitment to equity, excellence, and the holistic well-being of every student, and a willingness to challenge the status quo and reimagine what is possible for our schools and communities.

To realize this vision, school leaders must be equipped with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to lead for equity and social justice, to build culturally responsive and inclusive school communities, and to foster a culture of continuous learning and improvement (Khalifa et al., 2016; Larson & Murtadha, 2002). This requires a reimagining of leadership preparation programs (Bertrand & Rodela, 2018; Young, 2015) and professional development opportunities to better align with the complex realities and demands of 21st century schools (Jean-Marie et al., 2009). It also necessitates a shift in the structures, policies, and incentives that shape the work of school leaders, to create the conditions and support systems that enable them to lead in more innovative, adaptive, and equity-focused ways (Rogers, 2022).

We must approach the work of school leadership with a sense of humility, curiosity, and courage as we navigate the complexities and uncertainties of our times (Kruse, 2023). Leaders must be willing to question our assumptions, challenge the status quo, and imagine new possibilities for what education can and should be. They must be willing to take risks, make mistakes, and learn from our failures, recognizing that growth and progress often emerge from the most difficult and uncomfortable places. And they must be willing to center the voices, experiences, and aspirations of those who have been most marginalized and oppressed by our educational systems, recognizing that true equity and justice can only be achieved when we amplify the power and potential of every student, family, and community.

Ultimately, as these chapters suggest, the future of school leadership is about more than just improving student outcomes or closing gaps on standardized test scores. It is about creating schools that are vibrant, inclusive, and transformative spaces where all students can thrive and reach their full potential, and where the next generation of leaders and change-makers can be nurtured and empowered to create a more just, equitable, and sustainable world. This is the challenge and the opportunity facing school leaders today, and it is one that requires boldness,

creativity, and an unwavering commitment to the power of education to transform lives and communities.

In conclusion, in this volume we grapple with the urgent need to transform school leadership in the face of unprecedented challenges and uncertainties. Together, the authors have purposefully attempted to balance theory with exemplars from practices taken from schools across the globe. Collectively, they underscore the limitations of traditional, top-down leadership approaches and advocate for a paradigm shift toward more collaborative, adaptive, and equity-centered practices. By emphasizing the importance of building inclusive school communities, fostering a culture of continuous learning, and prioritizing the holistic well-being of every student, the authors challenge us to rethink the very purpose and goals of education. They argue that school leaders must be equipped with the tools and dispositions to lead for social justice, dismantle systemic inequities, and create transformative spaces where all students can thrive.

Chapter Summaries

The edited book is composed of seven chapters and a conclusion. Each offers insights into school leadership that challenges the status quo. Each is conceptually distinct. Yet, those familiar with social justice theorizing will recognize overlapping constructs and dilemmas. We submit that together they underscore the fundamental links between leadership and equity. Finally, we conclude with a final chapter that explores societal commitment to public education's role in democracy and human potential and the reimagining of school leadership amid current challenges and opportunities.

Chapter 2, written by Michalis Constantinides, revisits, reinforces, and extends our view of the underpinning principles and practices of school leadership in Aotearoa New Zealand. Constantinides presents vignettes from case studies of schools that illustrate the crucial role of the principal in ensuring ongoing improvement and innovation while working in increasingly complex and uncertain environments. The chapter discusses the need to understand the importance of relationships between individuals and groups, actions, contexts, environments, and cultures where processes of interaction shape principals' practices. Features of complexity thinking are used as a lens through which to understand schools as complex adaptive systems and illustrate the importance of the dynamics of the interactions among the agents and elements within the New Zealand educational system. Constantinides concludes by drawing together the implications for leadership that emerge across this chapter.

Chapter 3, written by Diedre LeFevre, explores the challenges of engaging in leadership practices that promote equity and empower students who have traditionally been underserved in schooling continues throughout educational contexts. Complex challenges like this require complex solutions because they have multiple causes and interdependencies and thus requires leaders focus on systemic and sustainable change for improvement rather than taking a "fixing parts" approach. LeFevre focuses on promising approaches to leadership which can

support capability in responding to such complex challenges. The chapter addresses four key areas for focus, (1) being comfortable with uncertainty, (2) understanding the role of emotion in leadership and change, (3) knowing how to interrupt problematic narratives, and (4) successfully engaging the views of young people. Implications for reimagining leadership include how to engage with diverse perspectives in decision-making, ways to support people struggling with the uncertainty of change, and how to lead sustainable responses to complex challenges.

Chapter 4, written by Whitney Hegseth, proposes a framework that can assist school leaders in working toward respect that is mutual and integrated with their other school improvement efforts. Hegseth defines mutual respect as the work of intervening on those power asymmetries typically found in classrooms, both between teachers and students, and among diverse groups of students, by way of according children increased equality, autonomy, and equity. Drawing on empirical examples from an ethnographic and comparative study of four elementary schools situated across two educational systems (i.e., Montessori and International Baccalaureate (IB)) and two national contexts (i.e., the United States and Canada), Hegseth highlights the need for a framework for mutual respect. The work of embedding symmetry, particularly in schools, which reflect the racism, classism, sexism, ableism, and heterosexism that is ever-present in broader society, is anything but straightforward. This is because: (1) mutual respect is multidimensional, and these dimensions can reinforce and conflict with one another in unexpected ways; and (2) mutual respect can be operationalized via a school's instructional, organizational, and social practices, again in ways that may conflict or work synergistically. By highlighting the complexity of leading for mutual respect, this framework is a first step toward supporting such efforts in leadership preparation and practice.

Chapter 5, written by Connor Scott and Melinda Mangin, considers school discipline practices and their effects. In recent decades, school discipline has become increasingly characterized by zero-tolerance policies that mandate pre-determined punitive consequences for specific offenses. Zero-tolerance policies have not been shown to improve student behavioral outcomes or school climate. Further, these disciplinary policies are applied unevenly across schools and student populations. Despite the well-documented research base that demonstrates that these practices are ineffective, they remain commonplace in K-12 school across the United States. Transformative and culturally responsive educational leadership requires school leaders to examine the historical, societal, and institutional factors that contribute to the racial-discipline gap within their particular schools. This process requires committing to leading for racial justice, self-reflexive practice, and having the courage to boldly name and dismantle practices that do not create equitable outcomes for students on the margins. Drawing on tenets of Critical Race Theory and Culturally Responsive School Leadership to situate the history and proliferation of harmful disciplinary practices, this chapter discusses how critically reflexive school leaders can mobilize restorative practices to dismantle the systems, structures, and practices that reproduce inequities in schools. Scott and Mangin provide aspiring and practicing

school leaders with the knowledge needed to reform existing school discipline policies and implement practices that support racial justice.

Chapter 6, written by Patricia Virella, delves into the transformative journey of Copley Public Schools (CPS) toward creating a more inclusive and just learning environment, mainly focusing on racial equity. The district's history of state control due to academic underperformance led to a shift toward antiracist and equitable practices under former superintendent Danielle Crane. In this chapter, Virella emphasizes the importance of achieving racial equity in schools, highlighting how one large urban school district engaged in a multiyear transformational process toward racial equity. The partnership between CPS and a university's educational leadership department was designed to address racial equity through a multiyear plan involving school and district leaders. The approach centered around Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, emphasizing support for professional growth and equitable student outcomes. Virella outlines a detailed plan grounded in research and best practices, focusing on leadership roles in shaping school culture and driving transformation. Lessons learned from the district's racial equity transformation highlight positive outcomes while addressing challenges such as historical practices influencing policies and systemic barriers to improvement. Leaders worked toward forming coalitions of progress, emphasizing the importance of understanding past influences on present environments and the need for informed decision-making to foster racially equitable educational settings.

Chapter 7, written by Megan Griffard, Diamond Ebanks, and Jacob Skousen, discusses the role of school leadership in the face of climate disasters and environmental injustice. These disruptions to schooling are emblematic of increasing global uncertainty. School leaders play a pivotal role mitigating uncertainty following an environmental crisis or disaster through leadership activities that support their communities. However, preparing school leaders for unexpected disruptions to schooling has often been overlooked by preparation programs and professional development. The goal of this chapter is to equip school leaders with an essential understanding of both the influence of disasters and environmental injustice on schools and the tools to respond effectively to these events. First, Griffard et al. contextualizes environmental injustice and inequality as a factor that influences school and student performance, especially for students living below the poverty line and students of color. Next, they synthesize how school leaders have responded to prior instances of climate disasters and environmental injustice. Finally, key considerations for school leaders confronting future occurrences are presented.

Chapter 8 written by Sharon D. Kruse and David E. DeMatthews offers a powerful antidote to the stress and burnout facing many school leaders today. This chapter integrates three key streams of mindfulness research and practice – contemplative, cognitive, and organizational mindfulness – to present a more caring and compassionate model of educational leadership. Drawing on the experiences of focal school leaders, the chapter explores how mindful leadership practices can transform schools by cultivating awareness of self, others, and the larger environment, developing equanimity and resilience in the face of