

“A Bunch of Liberal, Nazi Communists”: Equity-Oriented Educational Leaders’ Response to the Anti-CRT Phenomenon in Iowa

Leslie Ann Locke¹ & Ann Blankenship-Knox

Abstract

On September 22, 2020, Donald Trump issued Executive Order 13950, titled “Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping.” While the order has been revoked, as of May, 2022, 34 states, including Iowa (HF 802), had passed or were considering legislation prohibiting the use of critical lenses, such as Critical Race Theory, in public K-12 schools. In this study, we interviewed equity-oriented leaders in Iowa about how they are navigating HF 802, Iowa’s “anti-CRT” law, while remaining committed to their work. Qualitative analyses revealed three significant themes titled: Leaders See the Critical Reality: White Supremacy; Informants and Attacks; and Leading, Navigating, and Subverting HF 802. Recommendations for leadership practice and policy change are included.

Keywords: *anti-CRT, critical race theory, educational leaders*

Introduction

On September 22, 2020, then President Donald Trump issued Executive Order (EO) 13950, titled “Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping” (Trump, 2020). Alleging to promote “unity in the workplace,” the EO sought to “combat offensive and anti-American race and sex stereotyping and scapegoating” (Trump, 2020, p. 60683). While the EO did not prohibit the use of critical race theory (CRT) explicitly, its definition of what constitutes “divisive concepts” included several of the fundamental tenets of CRT, including the ideas of systematic racism, meritocracy, and privilege (Trump, 2020, p. 60685). Despite vociferous challenges by those in the civil rights community and a legal challenge claiming that the EO violated individual rights to free speech, equal protection, and due process, the EO resulted in the cancelation of at least 300 diversity and inclusion trainings (George, 2021). While President Biden revoked the EO on his first day in office, the damage was done. As of June 2021, 25 states had proposed legislation or EOs issued (or were in the works) that prohibited the use of CRT in public schools (Kim, 2021). This number escalated to 34 states by May 2022. As of this writing, 18 states have passed and implemented their versions of “anti-CRT” legislation, nine states have proposed or have similar legislation in process, and 17 states have vetoed, stalled, or overturned “anti-CRT” legislation (World Population Review, 2023).

1. Corresponding author: Leslie Ann Locke, Minnesota State University, Mankato: leslie.locke@mnsu.edu

With nearly identical to passages of Trump's EO, Iowa's anti-CRT law—House File (HF) 802—enacted in 2021, largely prohibits “race or sex stereotyping” in workplace trainings in government agencies, including public schools. HF 802 does not explicitly prohibit the use of CRT; however, it does explicitly ban the use of some of its key tenets in workplace trainings (e.g., the institutional and systemic nature of racism, myth of meritocracy, and race privilege) (H.F. 802, 2021, Section 1(2)). And while the law does not prohibit teachers from addressing topics such as “sexism, slavery, racial oppression, racial segregation, or racial discrimination” (H.F. 802, 2021, Section 1(4)(d) in the classroom, it does prevent teacher trainings that support teachers in learning how to present this curriculum with a critical or culturally responsive lens. Further, the law protects against “discomfort” a teacher or other employee might feel in trainings when engaging topics like racism, sexism, history, inequities, and so on (Faison, 2021, n.p.). Important to note here is the co-opting of language. To this point, Matias (2017) wrote that the use of co-opted terms and phrases, we argue like “race or sex stereotyping” among others in HF 802,

... are strategic manuevers used to mask white supremacist ideologues who have co-opted Civil Rights vocabulary or American freedom terminologies for the purpose of masking their bigotry as the moral, patriotic way. As a result, racists today are often even more emboldened to parade their racism in some perverted and twisted application of the 1960s Civil Rights vocabulary or American freedom figher rhetoric. (p. 122)

Another important point to make at this junction is the use of the term “discomfort” in HF 802. Being that comfort and discomfort are emotions that are highly subjective and individual, banning “discomfort” reflects a refusal to hear about race (racism) and/or sex (sexism) as “key factors in educational practices and policies” (Matias, 2017, p. 127) and reaffirms white comfort (white, male comfort more specifically) as paramount and untouchable.

White people feeling discomfort in Iowa is an interesting consideration as the state is majority white. However, while Iowa is predominantly white, public schools across the state are becoming more racially/ethnically diverse, and are sites where demographic change is clear. The percentage of white students in Iowa's public schools has been on a slow, downward trend for several years, while the percentage of racially and ethnically diverse students has been on a steady rise (see Locke & Schares, 2016). Currently, nearly 26% of students statewide identify as non-white, the majority of whom identify as Latinx (12%) and Black (7%) (Iowa Department of Education [IDOE], 2022). Similar racial/ethnic diversity among the educator workforce has not kept pace; 3% of teachers, 4% of principals, and 2% of superintendents identify as people of Color statewide (IDOE, 2022).

In a state like Iowa, where the majority of students are white (despite some demographic shifts), and the *vast* majority of educators are white, a ban on CRT in schools seems unnecessary, as it almost certainly has never existed in schools. Furthermore, and despite an anti-CRT law on the books, Iowa schools (like others across the country) have perpetuated and reinforced class, racial, and gender stratifications in egregious ways (Glanz, 2006). Many students have felt “discomfort” as a result of these stratifications, particularly students of Color (Crenshaw, 2010). However, their discomfort is not addressed in HF 802.

In this study, we trouble this context with self-identified equity-oriented educational leaders who are seeking to follow seemingly conflicting legal directives. Our goal with this study is to interrogate the following research question: *How do equity-oriented educational leaders, charged with providing equitable educational opportunities for all students in Iowa, stay committed to their*

work while navigating HF 802? In the second part of this article, we provide a brief review of literature on Critical Race Theory, its use in schools, and legislative attacks against it. In the third section of this article, we provide an overview of the theoretical frameworks we used as we conceptualized this study and analyzed the data. In the fourth section, we provide an overview of our research methods and results. In the fifth and final section, we discuss implications for practice and conclusions.

Literature Review of Critical Race Theory in K-12 Schools

Numerous scholars have set out to define CRT and its tenets, and each definition varies a bit. For the purposes of this study, we rely on the following to understand the tenets of CRT as they have developed from critical legal studies (CLS) and as they apply to K-12 schools (among other contexts): Permanence of racism (Tate, 1997), or the ‘ordinary-ness’ of racism as well as its inheritability and power in supporting the interests and mobility of whites (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Interest convergence, or the idea that whites will support racial reforms when the reforms also benefit whites (Bell, 1980). Whiteness as property (Harris, 1993), or the embeddedness of racism in U.S. society and relatedly, how whiteness operates and legitimizes benefits that white people enjoy simply because they are white. The critique of liberalism, or the troubling of ‘colorblindness’ and incrementalism, both of which allow for the perpetuation of racist policies and practices (Crenshaw, 1988). Counterstory or counternarrative(s), or the highlighting of stories and experiences from those who have been marginalized by policies and practices based on aspects of their identity (e.g., race, ethnicity, class, gender, language, age, immigrant status, religion, and so on) (Delgado, 1989).

It is imperative to recognize that CRT is not a specific curriculum but rather a critical lens with which to analyze history, praxis, policy, rules, and so on (see Gilborn, 2013; Locke & Grooms, 2022; Matias et al., 2014; Parker, 2003; Tate, 1997). Crenshaw specifically describes it as “a practice. It’s an approach to grappling with a history of white supremacy that rejects the belief that what’s in the past is in the past, and that the laws and systems that grow from that past are detached from it” (as cited in Karimi, 2021, para. 5). Crenshaw goes on to note, “Like American history itself, a proper understanding of the ground upon which we stand requires a balanced assessment, not a simplistic commitment to jingoistic accounts of our nation’s past and current dynamics” (as cited in Karimi, 2021, para. 10). CRT requires interrogation of our past and present with a critical lens and a more inclusive understanding of our history; it does not, as some argue, teach students to “hate their country” (Kaplan & Owings, 2021, p. 2).

As CRT is an analytical tool it is almost exclusively applied by faculty and advanced students in higher education circles, not in K-12 contexts. Yet, in the midst of the “culture wars,” CRT has been attacked and weaponized by those in the media, Republican law makers, conservative political groups and activists (e.g., the Foundation Against Intolerance and Racism [FAIR] and their associated state-level “Parent Alliance” groups, the Alliance Defending Freedom, the Manhattan Institute, and The Heritage Foundation), claiming that CRT is a Marxist ideology that threatens “the American way of life” (Karimi, 2021, para. 2). Principals and other school leaders, however, play an integral part in building and maintaining high-quality and inclusive educational spaces (DeMatthews et al., 2021). In an educational context in which low-income students and students of Color have been disproportionately segregated, disproportionately disciplined, and over-identified for special education services, it is imperative for school leaders to understand how educational systems have and continue to function for the benefit and to the detriment of students

(U.S. Department of Education, 2018); furthermore, they must be able to navigate the “intersectional and complicated co-relational forces of oppression (not limited to racism, ableism, sexism, nativism, xenophobia) that interlock and intersect in ways that maintain exclusion” (DeMatthews et al., 2021, p. 5). In this study, we focus on a group of equity-minded educational leaders attempting to navigate a system in which they are trying to deconstruct these systems of oppression in a hostile policy context.

Theoretical Frameworks

While CRT is a policy focus of this article and it informs our approach to this work, we did not use it as an analytic framework. Rather, we used two alternate theoretical frames to inform this study: transformative leadership and equity-based systems leadership, as we believe both frames are imperative for providing equitable learning opportunities for all students. Unlike transformational leadership, which focuses on system change generally, transformative leadership requires leaders to create change by challenging power dynamics and systemic inequities (Nevarez et al., 2013). According to Nevarez et al. (2013), “transformative leadership is a social-justice oriented approach undergirded by notions of democracy” (p. 143). Transformative leaders ground all of their work in equity, beginning with themselves; transformative leaders regularly engage in self-reflection to ensure that their work is not clouded by bias (Shields, 2017).

Equity-based systems leadership complements transformative leadership in that it “challenge[s] and seek[s] to redress racist, oppressive, and deficit-based systems and structures that have sustained educational disparities” (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2017, p. 6). Educational leaders are well positioned to disrupt inequitable systems and structures because they can “couple their understanding of power, privilege, and the political nature of schooling with advocacy to redress existing inequities” (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2017, p. 7). With a greater focus on the drivers of high-impact leadership practices and how they work to deconstruct oppressive structures (Wilson et al., 2013), this frame is particularly helpful in approaching topics related to educational laws and policies (and those who seek to disrupt them). Both frameworks helped us approach and make meaning of a policy context in which equity-oriented leaders are forced to challenge systematic constraints to adhere to what they understand are best practices for all students and to uphold their own educational values.

Without restrictive policies like HF 802, transformative and equity-based systems leadership could manifest in several ways. For example, equity-oriented educational leaders could explicitly plan and implement anti-racist professional development to support teachers as they engage in reflection and introspection, adapt curriculum, grow in their pedagogical skills, and embrace culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining practices (Khalifa et al., 2016; Paris, 2012). Further, these leaders could be free to create equity-oriented teams inclusive of educators, community members, and students with various responsibilities to openly critique and challenge lopsided policies and practices, and to ensure that equity, anti-racism, and supporting *all* students, remains at constant center in schools (Irby et al., 2020).

Positionality

Researcher positionality informs every aspect of the research, from conceptualization of the research problem to interpretation and meaning-making. We want to be transparent about our

own positionalities so that readers may use that knowledge to inform their reading of the research (Holmes, 2020).

I (Leslie) am a first-generation high school graduate, cisgender, white woman. While my parents did not graduate from high school, the narrative around education in our house was counter to what many colleagues and fellow educators assume (that my parents don't care about or support education). The very opposite was the reality in our house. My parents discussed how they wished they could have finished school and would have been able to have different opportunities as a result. It was my parents' narratives that guided me toward studying education. I finished high school, attended a community college, then a major university, then went on to receive a master's degree, then a doctorate. I don't know if any of those things would have happened without the support of my parents and their strong narratives about education (Locke, 2017).

While I do not experience the privileges that come from being raised in a middle or upper socioeconomic class home, nor do I experience privilege based on my gender or sex as compared to white cisgender men, I do experience privilege as a white person. As a scholar who is interested in understanding how education systems continue to underserve students, families, and communities who also experience systemic oppression and marginalization, I know that my perceptions and experiences as a white woman with a Ph.D. influence what I see and how I interpret and interact with others and with institutions.

I (Annie) identify as a white queer woman who was raised in an upper-middle class household and has had the opportunity to obtain two graduate degrees in law and educational leadership. I am also a wife and mother of two boys—I want them to have more than what our current world provides—more compassion, opportunity, and harmony. While my higher education identity has always included a social justice lens, my commitment to systematic change has intensified since becoming a mother. I believe that all children should have access to 1) educational spaces that support deep, critical learning; 2) factually accurate information about history and the tools to make meaning from it; and 3) learning materials that allow students to feel represented. While I attempt to approach data and analysis from a neutral place, my identities, privilege, and values certainly inform how I see the world.

Methodology, Data Collection, and Analysis

In this study, we used a basic qualitative research design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The focus of this methodology is to capture how participants make meaning of their experiences. By engaging in in-depth, semi-structured, and interactive interviews, we were able to gain a deep understanding of how our participants collectively were making meaning of a shared experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Furthermore, this methodology allowed us to understand our participants' experiences within their specific and shared contexts (Bryman & Bell, 2012). Specifically, this approach allowed us to uncover patterns of experience of equity-minded leaders who are trying to protect and promote equitable learning environments while navigating the new legal landscapes of HF 802.

To accomplish this goal, we used purposeful and snowball sampling to identify public K-12 building or district leaders in Iowa who self-identified as equity-oriented leaders. We invited seven leaders who represented a variety of schools and districts across the state, as well as diverse geographies (representing urban and rural schools and districts located in various parts of the state), to participate in the study and each accepted our invitation. Each educational leader participated in a 45-60 minute virtual interview. A profile of the participants is included in Table 1. In addition

to interviews, we also reviewed secondary data, which included reviews of websites, policies, and public meeting minutes/videos.

Table 1: Profile of Participants

Pseudonym	Role	School/District Geography	Years of Experience in Education	Gender (self-identified)	Racial Identity (self-identified)
Ana	Assistant Principal	urban	10	woman	Black
Jada	Leadership Partner	urban	15	woman	Black
Glen	Department Head	urban	25	man	Mexican American
Ben	Associate Superintendent	urban	20	man	White
Norm	Associate Principal	rural	10	man	White
Tom	Principal	rural	10	man	White
Joe	Principal	urban	12	man	White

We used inductive qualitative analyses as we collected the data. With this approach, we did not start with a predetermined list of themes based on an organizing framework as we would when using a deductive approach; rather, we identified themes and conclusions by focusing exclusively on the participant experiences (Thomas, 2006). This method involves immersing oneself in the data until the concepts and themes associated with the research question unfold (Curry et al., 2009). In inductive analysis, “although the findings are influenced by the evaluation objectives or questions outlined by the researcher, the findings arise directly from the analysis of the raw data, not from *a priori* expectations or models” (Thomas, 2006, p. 239). Means to establish trustworthiness beyond multiple forms of data collection included debriefing with each other as we collected and analyzed the data and with a trusted peer-colleague (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We also conducted member checking with participants during the interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Results

Before expanding on the thematic findings, it is important to point out a few foundational and fundamental ideas that were shared across all the participants. First, they agreed that CRT is not being taught in their schools and districts. One participant noted, “*up until about a year ago*,

[many] knew nothing about CRT." Second, they agreed that HF 802 is a means to limit teachers' capacity to discuss racism and other systemic means of oppression purposefully with students. Some participants described HF 802 as a "gag order," and a "muzzle." And third, the participants agreed that this legislation is particularly hard on educators. Being seen as "sinister," and called "a bunch of liberal, nazi communists," "socialist pieces of shit," and being accused of being "untrustworthy indoctrinators who are polluting everybody's agenda and ruining their kids' minds," is taking its toll. However, they agreed that there is a lack of guidance on how to lead under this new legislation. Tom (Principal/rural district) aptly described their collective sentiment, "Nobody knows what to do. Nobody knows what violates 802. There is no guidance."

We now move on from these foundational agreements to discuss the thematic findings. Our inductive analyses revealed three themes we have titled 1) Leaders See the Critical Reality: White Supremacy, 2) Informants and Attacks, and 3) Leading, Navigating, and Subverting HF 802. Each theme is supported by subthemes. We use the participants' perspectives to provide vivid representations of each theme and subtheme.

Leaders See the Critical Reality: White Supremacy

The leaders viewed HF 802 through critical lenses. They reported on its implicit motives of undermining equity and harming all students, but specifically and intentionally, students from marginalized groups. Norm (Assistant Principal/rural district) and Ben (Assoc. Superintendent/urban district) agreed, noting that HF 802 "*is a great example of white privilege in our white system*" and that the law "... *is trying to maintain a Euro-centric process*," respectively. In the end, as Ana (Assistant Principal/urban district) said, "*802 is trying to further marginalize the existence of our students of Color.*" Further the leaders understood the intent of this legislation to be to impede teachers from helping students make connections between specific ideas and events to larger systems of oppression. For example, Jada (Leadership Partner/urban district) said, "*The bill really tries to prevent teachers from acknowledging systems of oppression and to avoid particular topics and conversations.*"

Retaliation and Resistance to Change

Jada (Leadership Partner/urban district) discussed HF 802's impetus. She said,

It is cookie cutter legislation, and is a clear retaliation and retribution of the protests of 2020 and the momentum regarding racial justice and understanding. HF 802 stopped all of that. The attitudes of people who were starting to pivot to understanding what it is like to have to fight for equity and justice, all of that was shut down with the law. A lot of liberal teachers, I hear them say, "well I was gonna do something, but now I can't because of this law." Now they have an excuse for not doing the work—there is a law against doing things. The law exposes a lack of sincerity and lack of intention...and now it's an excuse for lack of progress.

The leaders went on to note that some people just do not want to hear the facts. Norm (Assistant Principal/rural district) shared that "802 limits and restrains teachers from presenting certain ideas. It is a means to intimidate educators and get us all to act a certain [the same] way." Similarly, Ben (Assoc. Superintendent/urban district) noted that "...in effect, 802 has done what it was designed

to do and that was to stop teachers from speaking out on topics that are historical fact.” Jada summed up the retaliation and resistance to change aptly when she said, “This law intended to create fear and shut down conversations, and it has done that.”

Confusing and Silencing Teachers

The participants described how HF 802 is confusing teachers about content that they can and cannot discuss in class, and, as a result, is creating an environment of silence. Joe (Principal/urban district) described how the teachers in his building are “on eggshells.” In Norm’s (Assistant Principal/rural district) school, “for some teachers, it is not worth the risk to potentially violate 802. The easiest road is to avoid it,” even though his school serves majority Latinx students. To this point he continued:

It is better now that we are not in the presidential election cycle...But still, most of our staff just avoid topics around systems of oppression. There is still a lot of confusion and teachers are really conscious of not bringing up anything controversial at all. It’s not worth the risk, so they just avoid it to be on the safe side.

Ben (Assoc. Superintendent/urban district) shared similar experiences in his district. He said,

The biggest shift for teachers is that they have stopped talking about anything that they felt like even approached the line. For example, our 3rd grade teachers had a unit that mentioned slavery, and they were all up in arms about it, like ‘we can’t teach this, we are going to get in trouble.’ Even though I have dug through the law, talked with our district lawyers about it, provided professional development for the teachers on what they can and can’t say, the teachers still see anything that might be considered controversial, they won’t talk about it in class.

Informants and Attacks

We asked the leaders to talk about any pushback they have experienced since HF 802 went into effect. Many of the leaders explained that the pushback, often communicated through parents, is informed by students and staff who are inside the schools. That is, students and staff inside the schools report out to parent groups, who then reach out to the leaders with their concerns and complaints. As a result, the participants detailed experiences where their sense of trust has been compromised; they are fielding attacks from mob-like parent groups who often escalate complaints to school boards and to the state Board of Education.

Lack of Trust and Mob Mentality

Many of the leaders noted that parent complaints are frequently centered on books used in classes, or on particular teachers’ behaviors. In one school, a parent group brought a complaint to the state Board of Education about a book used at the junior high and the teacher who uses it. Regarding this event Tom (Principal/urban district) said the following:

The book is fiction but a boy in the story gets shot by the police. The parents said that the book is anti-police and violates HF 802. The superintendent pulled the book, but in the end, we allowed the book to be used in a choice format. But some folks in this parent group are still going after the teacher and she is a great teacher who builds great community in her classes. But some of those kids' parents are not on board with her no matter what. They are still complaining about her. Now they are complaining that she has a Black Lives Matter sticker on her computer.

Tom went on to discuss how this parent group is receiving information, and how trust inside his school has been compromised as a result. He also pointed out the mob-like mentality and efforts of the parent group. He said:

We have staff and students inside the school that are feeding this group information. When parents call, they are directly quoting 802. There are certain phrases that they are being instructed to say in their phone calls and write in their emails. We have some staff members within our building who support 802 and they feed information to these squeaky wheels. Once the can is open, they want blood. It's hard to build a community when you can't trust the kids in the class, or in a school when you can't trust your colleagues. It's a witch hunt.

Joe (Principal/urban district) referred to this mob-like phenomenon as "...the gotcha police. Teachers are being monitored pretty heavily--particularly by conservative kids who let their parents know."

Ben (Assoc. Superintendent/urban district) noted that the source of the problems may be that "Some of the school staff do not believe in equity, that all means all." He went on to describe a similar belief he perceived among parents. He said:

I feel like the majority of our parents don't care about all kids, they only care about their own [kid]. The mentality is that it's a race. And some parents are willing to do whatever it takes to put their kids in front of other kids in that race. Our white middle class families don't want to have any kid placed in front of their kid. So when we change practices to be more equitable for all, these parents get upset because they think it's not fair and places their kid at a disadvantage.

Leading, Navigating, and Subverting HF 802

When we asked the participants to talk about their leadership related to 802, they agreed that "There is a lot of confusion about how to lead on 802" and there is "a lot of gray area." Regardless of the ambiguity around the law, the leaders discussed how they are navigating it as well as subverting it. Their means of leading and subverting often included changing the ways they presented some topics, or semantics, as well as supporting teachers in their efforts to provide a critical education for students despite the law. They also noted that most students desire and are self-advocating for more critical education.

Semantics and Changes in Approach

The leaders discussed how they worked with teachers regarding what they can and cannot do according to HF 802. In some schools, the leaders provided workarounds for the buzzwords in HF 802, but instructed the teachers to stick to the content. For example, Ana (Assistant Principal/urban district) said:

I tell the teachers that they can't say there is a system or that racism and sexism are ingrained in Iowa laws, not that they were doing that anyway. But I tell them you can't say this is what we mean when we say systemic racism. I think teachers are being creative with communicating the message that there are systems of oppression, but they can't explicitly connect the dots for the students.

In other schools, the law has resulted in more significant change. For example, Glen (Department Head/urban district) said:

HF 802 is a deterrent to the equity work we had going. So we decided that we were just going to call the equity work something different. But the other side is catching on. Now they are couching anything related to diversity, equity, and inclusion as CRT, I mean even social-emotional learning and Black History Month. We have had to change our professional development and our practice, particularly with some subjects, and be selective and careful of how we talk about things.

Supporting Teachers and Critical Education

Norm (Assistant Principal/rural district) noted that he is willing to absorb the pushback for teachers because "Systems of oppression and our actions throughout history are important for kids to know. Because how do you improve if you don't know the history and what it's doing and perpetuating itself?" In a similar vein, Ben (Assoc. Superintendent/urban district) commented, "I am not afraid to push the envelope. If I am upsetting this [anti-CRT] group, it reaffirms to me that I am doing something right." Tom (Principal/urban district) also commented that he supports his teachers and their freedom to teach. He said:

I don't want 802 to take away from teachable moments. If something happens in the news, we want to talk about it with the kids. I'm willing to fight that fight. If we can't talk about life, that's not education. I want the kids to have tough conversations and be able to handle difficult things. And not just get behind a computer and say whatever they want.

The participants were adamant that while they are supportive of critical education in their schools and districts, they were clear in their conviction that this is still not CRT. To this point Ben said,

I don't see CRT as equivalent to diversity, equity, inclusive practices, supporting transgender kids, making sure that our students from marginalized groups have a positive experience at school. That is not CRT. That is just being an inclusive environment for all kids.

Student Advocacy for Critical Education

Even though CRT is not being taught in their schools and districts, participants reported that students value and are self-advocating for more critical education. For example, Glen (Department Head/urban district) noted that in his district “We have heard from some students who worry that what we are doing is not enough. That we are not pushing hard enough.” In other schools and districts critical education may be more common. For example, Ana (Assistant Principal/urban district) recalled

When the kids find out that there is a law that your teacher can’t say this, this, or this. And they get fired up. Our Black Student Union did a session on CRT where they tried to teach their peers what CRT was, and alert them that ‘hey, this might be why your teacher seems like they might be tiptoeing around things.’ So the students are trying to have their voices heard in the face of legislation that is trying to silence them and marginalize their experiences.

Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Iowa’s anti-CRT law, HF 802, has its origins in Trump’s Executive Order and the movement of racial reckoning that occurred post-George Floyd’s murder. It is a retaliatory and oppressive school policy. The critical, equity-oriented, and transformative leaders who participated in this study clearly see the law as a means to support white supremacy and to suppress the struggle for equity in education, and as a disservice to education, educators, and students—particularly those who represent marginalized groups (Nevarez et al., 2013). They saw it as a “gag order,” “a muzzle” to support whiteness. We agree.

Although it has not removed CRT from the schools, as it did not exist there in the first place, HF 802 has proven effective in its ulterior motives (Kaplan & Owings, 2021). Through the strategic use of ideological and co-opted language (Matias, 2017) it has confused and intimidated teachers, censored conversations, and interrupted progress regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion (Kim, 2021). It has worked to deprofessionalize education and further exhaust teachers. It has suppressed education about particular historical facts and empowered critics. HF 802 opened the door for teachers to be threatened with their jobs, and their curricula to be surveilled (Strunk et al., 2021) and scrutinized. It has prioritized and emboldened white emotionality and comfort (Matias, 2016; 2017). Supporters of this legislation have purposefully made their way through the door. HF 802 is not only a bully (Kim, 2021), it is an attack (Matias, 2017)—white supremacy wrapped in policy.

The participants detailed their experiences leading within this legal context and sustaining their equity-oriented practice. As transformative (Nevarez et al., 2013) and equity-based leaders who support social justice, they worked to challenge power dynamics and systemic inequities (Nevarez et al., 2013), and implemented systems-level workarounds to this policy and adhered to what they understood to be best practices for their students (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2017). For example, they navigated and subverted HF 802 through the use of changes in language or semantics and by creating “choice” options for some curricula. They “pushed the envelope” and felt validated when they upset the supporters of HF 802. Many of the leaders remarked, however, that the pushback and attacks are constant. Being called liberals, nazis, communists, and socialist pieces of shit is

the least of their worries. More concerning in the midst of these attacks, is the concomitant nationwide teacher shortage. These leaders are rightly concerned that legislation like HF 802 will be the proverbial last straw. They worry that the passionate and quality teachers and administrators will finally leave the profession. To this point Ben (Assoc. Superintendent/urban district) noted:

I was an administrator under George W. Bush and NCLB, and ratings and all that. I would welcome back those kinds of pressures, they seem so benign compared to what we are dealing with now. I mean this is just so scary. We have everything scrutinized by parents and they are doing everything they can to challenge schools, and we are just not used to it. This is the first time in 20 years I have considered getting out of education. I think we are going to lose good teachers and administrators because we are being attacked constantly.

The participants are not hopeful for the future of Iowa. Ben said “The next 5 to 10 years in Iowa look really scary. I think it is going to get worse before it gets better.” In a majority white state like Iowa, this outlook is particularly grim, especially for students of Color and students from other marginalized groups. Moreover, the percentage of non-white students continues to rise across the state (IDOE, 2022; Locke & Schares, 2016). With HF 802 solidly in place, their push for critical education will likely be ignored as their teachers fear attacks for engaging with certain topics. HF 802 will narrow the curriculum for all students and they will continue to receive a half-baked conceptualization of history. Their education will become progressively one-sided, and will ultimately result in a disservice to them individually, to society, and to Iowa.

We agree with Strunk et al. (2021) that educators must be agents of anti-racist change. However, this is impossible inside the shackles of HF 802. Many teachers and leaders alike serving public schools across the country have already lost their jobs due to conflicts over anti-CRT legislation and related political debates (Natanson & Balingit, 2022). Continued public and private support for teachers and finding ways for them to continue to deliver critical content are important, but we fear not enough. Beyond a wholesale reversal of HF 802, and we understand the risk involved, we recommend transformative and equity-based system leaders like those who participated in this study and others in schools and districts across Iowa use their voice and their vote as educator-activists to push back on this legislation. As the participants noted, they may not make much headway in terms of educating anti-CRT proponents and ideologues on what CRT is (and is not). But, leaders can use their position and voice to create alliances and to push back even harder against this institutional censorship (Strunk et al., 2021). They can push for and create spaces for equity and critical education in the face of this white supremacist bully.

Yet, K-12 educators should not have to do this advocacy alone. We have no doubt that this will be a “prolonged project of racial justice” (Matias, 2017, p. 119). We encourage more collaboration and allegiance among K-12 schools and districts with community organizations, policy centers, non-profits, and higher education, to make a consistent and collective push toward change. Collaboration among these groups and pushing new legislation, contacting political representatives, creating petitions, and supporting opponents of anti-CRT laws for seats on school boards and other local and state seats are just a few ideas. However, higher education has unique responsibilities to engage in this effort. As the participants noted, “Nobody knows what violates 802. There is no guidance.” Teacher and leadership preparation programs should be educating their candidates on how whiteness ideology (Matias, 2017) works and manifests in laws like HF 802 and helping them prepare for engagement with it and to develop the mental and emotional fortitude

to persist (Matias, 2017). Further, higher education as well as leadership/professional organizations should provide guidance and skills development to push back against HF 802 and sibling laws in other states. Researchers should be studying how anti-CRT laws are playing out in the various states and how educators are managing it. They should also study where anti-CRT laws may have been defeated and the strategies that were involved.

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