



**Turner, E. O. (2020). *Suddenly diverse: How school districts manage race & inequality*. University of Chicago Press.**

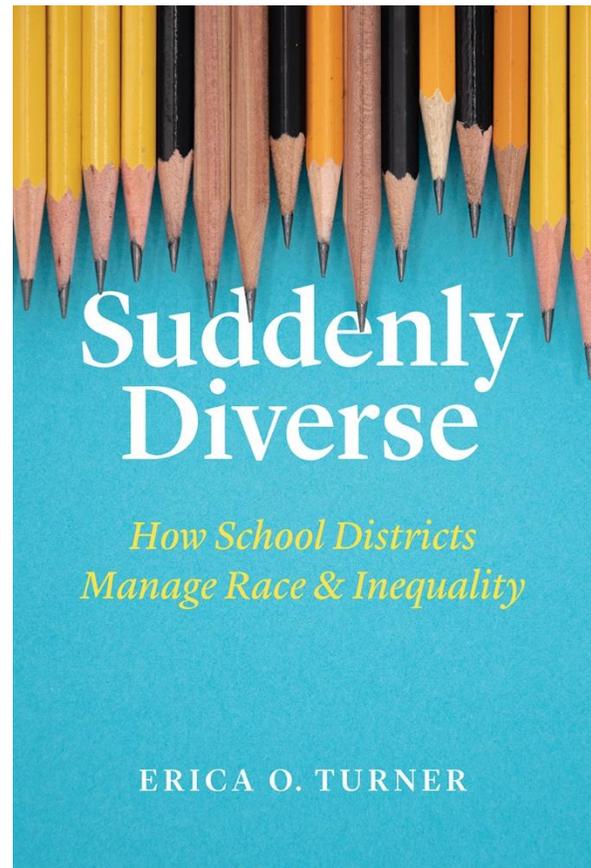
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Recent projections from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) demonstrate clear racial and ethnic demographic shifts underway in U.S. public schools. In stark contrast to the racial composition of public schools in the early years of the 21st century, NCES projects that by the year 2029, White students will comprise 44% of the total population of public-school students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). As school districts across the nation grapple with the realities of their changing racial demographics, Erica Turner's book, *Suddenly Diverse: How School Districts Manage Race & Inequality*, provides an in-depth, comparative case study of how leaders in two diversifying districts in Wisconsin navigated their duty to meet the needs of all students and families.

The school districts featured in *Suddenly Diverse* should be familiar to U.S. readers, as they exemplify popular notions of a changing America that is regularly portrayed in the media. Turner describes Milltown as "a city with a struggling economy and a less inclusive attitude toward immigrants and people of color" (p. 164). In fact, a Milltown school



board member explained that the county where Milltown is located previously attempted to make English the community's official language (p. 1). It is a town, like many across the Midwest, that has historically identified as a fairly conservative, racially homogenous community of White, working-class citizens. To be clear, this ahistorical characterization by Milltown residents denies the impact of settler colonialism that has violently displaced scores of Indigenous people from these very lands. Nevertheless, Milltown is portrayed as a picture of small-town Middle America "where the first question residents ask each other is 'Where did you go to high school?', followed by 'Where did your grandparents go to high school?'" (p. 2).

In contrast to Milltown's conservative, working-class identity, Fairview is described as a decidedly more liberal city, with a friendlier outlook on its growing racial and ethnic diversity. In 1963, prior to the passage of the federal Civil Rights Act, city leaders passed a local ordinance codifying protection against discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, or national origin (p. 19). Fairview has even enacted legislation qualifying it as a sanctuary city by protecting undocumented community members from discriminatory harassment due to their lack of U.S. citizenship. Anchored by "dominant economic sectors of education and government, typically less susceptible to changes in the economy" (p. 19), Fairview is positioned as a progressive city primed to welcome the impending changes in its racial and ethnic composition.

At first glance, Fairview and Milltown would appear to be towns on diametrically opposite paths toward addressing the opportunities and challenges that one might expect with a diversifying school district. However, Janice, a school board member from Fairview, asks a question that is helpful in framing one of the fundamental arguments in *Suddenly Diverse*. Struggling with Fairview's

ability to address the needs of all students in the district, Janice asks "Can we do it? Can we educate a diverse population without being an inner-city school system?" (p. 62). Although different in their underlying political ideologies and economic realities, district leaders in both Milltown and Fairview feared becoming an urban school district. In this case, "urban" is more than simply a geographic designation. Rather, it is seen as a racialized marker of poverty, decline, and neglect, and certainly not the kind of place that any "good school district" would want to willingly become. Therefore, both districts engaged in a practice that Turner describes as color-blind managerialism.

Along with the very concept of school district leadership, Turner positions color-blind managerialism as a unique racial project of education policy and leadership. Sociologists Omi and Winant (2015) defined a racial project as "simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial identities and meanings, and an effort to organize and distribute resources (economic, political, cultural) along particular racial lines" (p. 125). Therefore, in *Suddenly Diverse*, color-blind managerialism is viewed as a distinct method of "governing American schools and public institutions" (p. 26).

Color-blind managerialism is defined as "the linking of color-blind notions of equity with new managerial policies, practices, and structures" (p. 11). This form of managerialism draws on a framework rooted in the neoliberal assumptions of the benefits of competition, privatization, and accountability metrics that have become the bedrock of American society over the last several decades. It "emphasizes numerical accounting, entrepreneurialism, and market-based mechanism" (p. 24) combined with nebulous, race-neutral notions of equity. Leaders who engage in color-blind managerialism often express a staunch dedication to realizing equity through

narrowing “achievement gaps,” but rarely seek to address the White supremacist systems, structures, policies, and practices responsible for such gaps. This view of equity is often framed in an inherently individualistic lens of accountability that ignores the need for transformational change in order to truly care for, rather than just about, students of color (Shevalier & McKenzie, 2012). This conception, in tandem with the growth of accountability measures due to the 2001 *No Child Left Behind Act* and shrinking state funding for public goods and services, provide a critical framework for understanding how district leaders shift their governing styles to respond to demographic changes.

A strength of Turner’s work is how she situates Milltown and Fairview’s struggles within the broader political and policy contexts that deeply informed the challenges and opportunities expressed through this study. Using observations, extensive interviews and documentary materials, the data for this book were collected during 2009 and 2010, a tumultuous time in the country due to a lingering economic recession that contributed to rampant unemployment, deep cuts in public spending, and an underlying sense of xenophobic nationalism often dubiously framed as economic anxiety. In addition, public school districts remained beholden to the punitive regulations of *No Child Left Behind* that used high-stakes standardized assessments as the primary metric to determine whether schools were adequately serving all of their students, and in particular, historically marginalized and racially minoritized students. Turner argues that the fervor to respond to this particular law was responsible, at least in part, for each district’s pivot to using accountability as a means to confront issues of equity. Although implemented differently in Milltown and Fairview, leaders in both districts “adopted data-monitoring practices as official antiracism in a racial project of color-blind managerialism” (p. 107). By acknowledging and committing to monitor the

persistent “achievement gaps” between racially minoritized students and White students, leaders positioned their districts in a positive light, a crucial component in their subsequent marketing efforts.

*Suddenly Diverse* also underscores the significant role that the marketization of public schools played in each district. District leaders engaged in a balancing act to satisfy the needs of the most vulnerable students within the district while retaining wealthier White families. Turner details how Wisconsin’s open enrollment policies pushed Milltown and Fairview to engage in significant marketing attempts to remain financially viable. She argues that district leaders’ implementation of color-blind managerialism occurred “as they tried to adopt new policies to address racial inequity without alienating white middle-class families” (p. 73).

Derrick Bell’s (1980) theory of interest convergence is employed to explain how efforts to invest more deeply in racial equity transformation were dependent on the explicit approval of privileged White families who generally sought to prioritize their own children’s educational interests over the specific needs of students of color. This tension is evident throughout the book, as Turner recounts the struggle between conceptions of education as an individualistic mechanism for social mobility as opposed to a public good that benefits the entire community. At the same time, Turner illustrates how the “identities and cultures of students of color [became] contained, co-opted, and commodified for others through the official antiracism of marketing” (p. 144). Similar to public parks, movie theaters, and coffee shops, experiential benefits for White students attending racially diverse schools were promoted as an additional urban amenity to staunch the flow of families from Milltown and Fairview schools to the surrounding wealthier, White school districts. District racial equity plans were not designed to address the

material concerns of families of color, but instead were positioned as a clever marketing strategy to benefit White families.

Acknowledging and monitoring racial inequities were positioned as praiseworthy examples of antiracism, rather than actions that could actually lead to dismantling the structural causes of racial “achievement gaps.”

Admittedly, it was not until the last pages of *Suddenly Diverse* that I found a point of disagreement. Even then, it is not a disagreement regarding the main concepts put forth in the book or the current realities that district leaders face, but instead it is one where I simply imagine a more activist-oriented role for district leaders. Turner writes that school district leaders’ “jobs are already very demanding, they do not have particularly strong influence outside of schools, and schools cannot take on the full responsibility of these broader changes” (p. 161). I agree that district leaders are undoubtedly overburdened with the weight of bureaucratic malaise. However, I would argue that they are uniquely positioned to be the strongest activists for education transformation within this system. I also empathize with the political nature of the superintendency, particularly as their employment contracts lie in the hands of school board members, 90% of whom are popularly elected officials (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2016). However, I would also argue that those who choose to accept such positions must also be prepared to act decisively and courageously, regardless of the political whims of the day.

In “The Lost Education of Horace Tate,” education historian Vanessa Siddle Walker (2018) illustrates the incredible organizing power that educational leaders throughout the South wielded to gain access to better educational opportunities and experiences for Black students. Many of those education leaders were rightfully revered and held just as much prestige and power (if not more) than the elected officials in their communities. I

believe that school superintendents can inspire a coalition of parents, teachers, staff, and students as well as community partners and business leaders whose very survival depends on the perceived success of the school district. As Turner illustrates throughout this book, even families that do not have children or who choose to send their children to non-district schools are indirectly impacted by the school district’s reputation through property values, economic development, and the like.

Being a school superintendent is necessarily a political job, with countless difficulties and struggles. There will always be some community members who do not agree with the district leader’s tactics. But to say that they do not have especially strong influence outside of schools denies the historical legacy of activist education leaders. Although the unique political, socio-historical, and cultural contexts of each district undeniably shape the priorities of each district leader, their greatest priority and responsibility should be to serve as activists for racial equity and justice within their districts.

At the risk of perpetuating lackluster attempts at performative antiracism through book clubs and reading groups, I believe *Suddenly Diverse* should be required reading for current and aspiring district leaders. It is also an excellent example of methodologically rigorous qualitative research that would be beneficial for emerging scholars interested in studying education leadership and policy. It is a well-written, accessible, and compelling study of the dueling realities that many leaders face as their districts become more racially diverse. Turner provides readers with a clear and exemplary understanding of the ways that color-blind managerialism perpetuates the racial inequities that leaders regularly claim they are working to eradicate. This particular passage highlights the crux of this argument:

District leaders seemed to maintain a commitment to making their schools

more equitable, but racial equity came to mean raising test scores, perhaps promoting “diversity,” or keeping their school districts afloat rather than transforming inequities. (p.150)

If adopted widely in school districts and preparation programs for education leaders, this text could be an integral part of exposing

how previous efforts purportedly aimed at transforming racial inequities have functioned as mere theatrical pursuits that have left White supremacist systems and structures largely intact. Highlighting these policy failures will hopefully encourage the next generation of district leaders to develop novel, actionable steps to fundamentally transform their districts in service of an equitable and just future.

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