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# Introduction

How do teachers, students, parents, school leaders, and administrators build an antiracist school system? This book tackles that challenging question, from two distinct, but aligned, perspectives. The first perspective grows out of Dr. Gregory C. Hutchings, Jr.'s experiences of being a student, an administrator, and ultimately superintendent in a school district where race has long controlled the education that a student receives. The second perspective emerges from Dr. Douglas S. Reed's historical understanding of how that racist school system was built—brick by brick, policy by policy. Combined, we feel that these two perspectives can powerfully equip school leaders—teachers, administrators, and students—to demand and create not just a nondiscriminatory school but an antiracist one.

We believe that our understanding of what creates racist school systems and what creates antiracist school systems can be used as a powerful tool throughout the United States. Our hope is that this work can be used to recreate school systems, to commit them to antiracist practices and policies, and to finally grant the promise of a culturally rich and profound education to all students.

A distinctive aspect of this book is that it is coauthored by an African American man who was educated in Alexandria public schools and grew up to become its superintendent working to dismantle the racist practices and systems that he personally had to overcome as a student. Greg Hutchings's personal story in Alexandria's schools—and afterward—provides a vivid picture of ways that policies and practices structure the educational (and life) opportunities of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students in systemically racist ways. In the fall of 1992, just before Bill Clinton was elected president of the United States, Gregory Hutchings began his sophomore year at T. C. Williams High School, in Alexandria, Virginia.

# Greg's Story

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I remember the excitement and prestige of wearing the Titans logo on my T-shirt as I walked the halls of T. C. Williams. The high school sometimes felt like a session of the United Nations due to its cultural diversity and its status as the only high school in the city of Alexandria. Alexandria was—and is—a city of the haves and the have-nots, but it brought all of its students together in one building in high school. Despite that physical proximity of diverse students, Alexandria's educational system nonetheless divided students by race as it tracked students into courses.

I knew I was destined for college after high school, and I also knew that college preparatory courses were the key to fulfilling that destiny. Unfortunately, at the beginning of my sophomore year, the school administration enrolled me in classes that were not on the college track, taught by unmotivated teachers. On a typical day, my teacher would write the assignment on the board then sit and read the newspaper at his desk, not concerned whether students learned or even completed the assignment.

One day, while walking to the bathroom after being excused from class, I noticed that other classrooms seemed to be highly engaged. I heard student-led discussions, ideas being exchanged, and even some laughter. A light bulb went off in my head: I needed—and wanted—to be in a learning environment like that. I soon discovered these high-energy and rigorous classes were the Honors classes. My first thought was, “Well, sign me up” and I scheduled a meeting with my school counselor to be enrolled in the Honors class.

Unfortunately, the school counselor informed me that my test scores and grades were not good enough for Honors and therefore school policy did not permit me to enroll. I was devastated, but rather than accepting the school counselor's decision, I decided to ask my fellow classmates to sign a petition to allow me to enroll in the Honors class. I then had the audacity to take the petition signed by several students to the high school principal to request enrollment despite not meeting the course requirements.

To my surprise, the principal admired my determination and courage and walked me to the counseling department to enroll me in the Honors course. At that moment, I realized for the first time that my voice was powerful, and it is even more powerful when it is heard by someone willing to assist. My life's trajectory changed at that very moment and stirred my desire to be an advocate not only for myself but for

others—especially those who are ignored. I graduated from T.C. in 1995 and headed to Old Dominion University (ODU) through early admissions by the support and encouragement of my senior year school counselor.

Despite my enthusiasm, my first year in college did not go well. ODU was a predominantly White institution with large lectures of at least 500 students. In my first year of college, I had a 1.2 GPA (Grade Point Average) and was placed on academic probation. I felt underprepared for college. I experienced imposter syndrome and began to feel guilty about being in college, asking myself why I was there. Even though I had enrolled in Honors classes during my high school years, I was not prepared for postsecondary education nor the independence that college afforded. At a time when I saw others ready to tackle the world, my self-esteem was low, and I felt like a failure.

I had friends who attended Hampton University and spent much of my time visiting them at Hampton. During my sophomore year, I decided to transfer to the prestigious, historically Black university. There, I saw another side of Black life in the United States. For the first time in my life, I was surrounded by Black students who were all on a mission to change the world. With Black professors and demanding classes, filled with predominantly Black students, Hampton is a college for the Black elite. It was the first time, outside of sitcoms like *The Cosby Show* and *A Different World*, that I saw Black students who had generational wealth, drove expensive cars, and had parents who were doctors or lawyers.

Hampton University generated in me a sense of pride that I had never felt before. I made the Dean's List for the three consecutive semesters that I was there. The message of Hampton—and historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) across the country—taught me powerful lessons: how to be a young Black man, to respect myself and my Black history—to even know my own family history. At Hampton, I had an epiphany that just like my White counterparts, I, too, deserved to be at the table and to have a voice in this country.

Those lessons were profoundly different from those I had at T. C. Williams, where my Black peers and I experienced poor or indifferent teaching, low expectations, and an oppressive culture inflicted by the mostly White teaching force. This dismissal of Black students and Black culture deprived me and my classmates the perspective that Hampton provided: serving witness to the talent, culture, and contributions that Black Americans provided to US history. T.C. had failed BIPOC students and neglected my untapped potential—and that of countless other BIPOC classmates.

Hampton undid that sense of discouragement and neglect. Though my time at Hampton University was short-lived, it was a pivotal and

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powerful moment in my life. The eighteen months at Hampton gave me the confidence I needed to succeed as a Black man in our country. I decided to return to ODU to finish my “college race” with a newfound confidence and Black pride, thriving both academically and socially. I maintained a GPA of 3.0 or higher through graduation and joined the first Black collegiate Greek lettered fraternity, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. I was proud to join the likes of Thurgood Marshall, Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King, Jr., Jesse Owens, W. E. B. DuBois, Duke Ellington, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Dick Gregory, Cornel West, and other luminaries as an Alpha man. I later became the chapter president.

Fast forward twenty years: I am now the superintendent of Alexandria City Public Schools after earning my doctorate in education at the second oldest college in the United States, the prestigious College of William & Mary, and serving as the superintendent of Shaker Heights Public Schools, a trailblazing school system in Ohio.

While many things have changed for me, for BIPOC students too many constants remain. During my tenure as superintendent in two different states, I’ve spoken with countless BIPOC students whose school counselors discouraged them from enrolling in rigorous courses—just as I experienced in my high school years. One Black student shared that she reviewed her course options and wanted to enroll in an AP course, a common choice for students with college aspirations but less common for many BIPOC students. Her parents supported that choice and encouraged her to pursue her desire. To her frustration, her school counselor discouraged her from taking the class, indicating that it was a demanding, college-level course. Just as I had done long before her time, she persisted, and insisted that her school counselor approve her course selections. These efforts at schools across the United States to deny Black students a challenging and rich curriculum stretch across generations. This experience showed me once again how consistently school systems have discriminated against BIPOC student over time, even to the present day.



## **THE HISTORICAL AUDACITY AND POWER OF BLACK LIVES MATTER**

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In 2020, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement galvanized public opinion and motivated efforts to tackle racism directly. The

**FIGURE 0.1** ● Black Lives Matter




Image by Patrick Behn from Pixabay

current efforts to tackle racism go beyond requests that White folks try not to discriminate or requests that society realize how White norms influence all our systems and institutions. The BLM movement has inspired current activists to tackle racism directly by demanding the dismantling of policies and practices that systematically and continuously disadvantage BIPOC lives. In schools, that means no longer tolerating ostensibly racially neutral policies that “just happen” to fall disproportionately on students of color. To be antiracist is to realize that racism doesn’t just happen; it is systemically built and maintained.

The BLM movement has shown many White Americans what most Black Americans already knew: that the experiences of Whites within the criminal and social justice systems are vastly different from the experiences of people of color. The same is true of the educational system in the United States. While many individual teachers and administrators reach out to address the needs of BIPOC students, larger, systemic forces deny educational equity to BIPOC students. In other words, individual BIPOC students may benefit from caring educators who reach out to mentor or advocate for them. But those piecemeal efforts—as valuable and rewarding as they may be—are insufficient to address the scope of systemic racism in education. It’s not enough for people like Greg’s principal and senior year school counselor to take a shine to individual students, to allow one or two to take an honors course, or to help them with a college essay. What is needed is a systemic response that strategically targets the circumstances that give rise to the inequities





White detractors will point to success stories of a few individual BIPOC students as “evidence” that systemic racism doesn’t exist, that the system rewards talent and hard work. What is left out of these feel-good anecdotes is how comparable efforts by equally talented White and BIPOC students yield vastly different outcomes.

in the first place. The point is not to help a few select students overcome the obstacles of systemic racism in education, the point is to remove systemic racism from education. White detractors will point to success stories of a few individual BIPOC students as “evidence” that systemic racism doesn’t exist and that the system rewards talent and hard work. What is left out of these feel-good anecdotes is how comparable efforts by equally talented White and BIPOC students yield vastly different outcomes. Instead of telling stories of students who overcome adversity to succeed, we need to identify the elements of the educational system that routinely and repeatedly ensure that that BIPOC students are disproportionately represented among students who don’t finish high school and those referred to the juvenile justice system, tracked into poorly taught classes with low expectations, and overrepresented among students identified with emotional or behavioral disturbances but underrepresented among students identified with a learning disability. And then we need to replace and repair those elements of the system.

Young people of color need what public education has offered to affluent White students for generations: exposure to a rich set of learning experiences, the presence of role models who look like them to build confidence, institutional support to identify and achieve their goals, a ready encouragement to thrive, a robust expectation that they will thrive, and ample resources to intervene if they are not thriving. Unfortunately, these are the specific areas that are lacking in our schools across the nation. The systemic racism that permeates public education crushes, both academically and personally, so many BIPOC students every year. While the creation of public schooling advanced the prospects of White US citizens, the wholesale neglect of schooling for their BIPOC counterparts left them to fend for themselves and, as a result, many grew convinced that they were unworthy or not good enough, despite their obvious talents and abilities.

## THE HISTORICAL LEGACIES AND CONTINUITIES OF RACISM IN EDUCATION

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The current pervasive achievement and opportunity gaps within schools and society are the results of historic and present-day efforts to keep BIPOC children inferior and oppressed, efforts that date back to Horace Mann’s advocacy for common schooling in the 1830s and 1840s. When the organizers

of a Black boycott of Boston's public schools called on Horace Mann repeatedly in the 1840s to condemn the segregation of White and Black students in Boston, Horace Mann refused, not wanting to jeopardize his efforts to gain more resources for White public education (Mabee, 1968). Into the 20th century, as Southern schools faced desegregation court orders, they closed Black schools and fired Black teachers to meet the minimum requirements of court-ordered desegregation, imposing costs on the communities least ready to bear those costs. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "Now I believe we ought to do all we can and seek to lift ourselves by our own bootstraps . . . but it's a cruel jest to say to a bootless man that he ought to lift himself by his own bootstraps. And many negroes, by the thousands and millions, have been left bootless as a result of all of these years of oppression" (King, 1967).

In our day, some leaders expect our BIPOC students to overcome adversity and to have the "grit" to engage in rigorous coursework (Duckworth, 2018); however, we ignore the generational oppression and institutional racism that continues to intentionally marginalize people of color in the United States. In 1967, Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton wrote

When a black family moves into a home in a White neighborhood and it is stoned, burned or routed out, they are victims of an overt act of individual racism which most people will condemn. But it is institutional racism that keeps black people locked in dilapidated slum tenements, subject to the daily prey of exploitative slumlords, merchants, loan sharks and discriminatory real estate agents. The society either pretends it does not know of this latter situation, or is in fact incapable of doing anything meaningful about it. (Ture et al., 1967, p. 4).

This form of institutional and systemic racism still defines educational experiences of BIPOC students and permeates public educational institutions across the United States. Acts of overt discrimination may be condemned in schools, but conditions of systemic racism are tolerated, indeed often fostered, by schools and their leaders. BIPOC students have known about these circumstances and these excuses for generations; many in White society either claim to not know or to be incapable of doing anything meaningful in response. This book aims to show all Americans what can be done to redress systemic racism within schools and to urge us all to get into more than a little Good Trouble at our schools.