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WHO BELONGS IN NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOLS?: A MIXED METHODS REEXAMINATION OF ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL TRANSFER

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the researchers, practitioners, community organizers, students, family members, and neighbors who care about the school down the block. Our collective commitment to shifting the narrative and building a just world where all families' needs are met is the hope I draw on.

This dissertation is also dedicated to my grandmother- a radical, an eccentric, and a former public school teacher of over 30 years. You are the woman who raised me and I am the woman you raised.

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Lastly, I wrote a dissertation about educational justice in the shadow of genocide. Since October 7, 2023 the Israeli government has systemically obliterated Palestinian life in Gaza including the school system. The United Nations has used the term “scholasticide” to describe the targeted destruction of educational infrastructure as well as the murder of teachers, practitioners, students, and families. From Chicago to Gaza, all people deserve the opportunity to learn, grow, make mistakes, and be free.

Who Belongs in Neighborhood Schools?: A Mixed Methods Reexamination of Alternative High School Transfer

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~~Crown Family~~[1] School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice

[1] This is my way of acting in solidarity with Palestinian people and putting into practice my social work values.

Who Belongs in Neighborhood Schools?: A Mixed Methods Reexamination of Alternative High School Transfer

Each year, approximately half a million students in the US transfer out of mainstream public schools into a separate, largely invisible system of alternative high schools (Carver et al., 2010; Fresques et al., 2017). Alternative high schools are designated for students deemed "at risk of educational failure as indicated by poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, pregnancy, or similar factors associated with temporary or permanent withdrawal from school" (Carver et al., 2010, pg. 13). Despite being intended for students experiencing acute barriers to successful high school completion, there is no standard of practice for alternative high schools, no systematic information about who attends such schools or why they left the mainstream setting, and no established process to review the quality of education or services provided (Fresques et al., 2017). Alternative high schools are also highly segregated spaces. The student population in alternative schools is overwhelmingly more likely to be Black, diagnosed with a disability, and/or come from low socioeconomic households than the overall population of the district in which alternative schools are located (Lehr & Lange, 2003; Perzigian et al., 2017; Phillippi et al., 2021; Education Labs, 2021).

The small existing research on alternative high schools has generally focused on describing individual alternative school models and framing alternative high school transfer as a dropout prevention strategy (Rumberger et al., 2017). As a result, there is a pervasive ontological assumption that alternative high school transfer is an "opportunity" for historically marginalized students, who are characterized in policy and scholarly discourse as academic and behavioral problems (Duffield, 2018; Griffiths et al., 2019; McGee & Lin, 2017; Escobar-Chaves, 2002). However, limited evidence demonstrates that critical outcomes, such as attendance, graduation,

and postsecondary job attainment are not demonstratively improved for students who transfer to alternative high schools (Catterall & Stern, 1986; De Velasco et al., 2008; Wilkerson et al., 2016).

Originating in the 1970's as "free schools," alternative high schools were conceived as a response to the culminative failures and racial inequities of the traditional public school system (Kozol, 1982). Early champions of alternative education were activists and community members of color who envisioned alternative schools as a form of self-governance and self-determination (Kozol, 1982). These "free schools" combated the withholding of educational opportunities from Black and Latine students in mainstream schools by providing politically-conscious curriculum and an array of social services. For a brief period, alternative high schools were governed by community members, independent from districts as charter schools (Kozol, 1982; Porowski et al., 2014).

However, in the 1980's, paralleling the era of mass incarceration, alternative high schools became associated with "disruptive youth" and were increasingly operated by juvenile legal departments, for profit companies, or corporate like Charter Management Organizations (CMOs). This shift toward privatization moved control of alternative high schools away from communities as well as created a pathway for alternative high schools to expand rapidly as charter schools and schools contracted with districts. The alternative high school ecosystem has become extensive, with an alternative high school currently operating in 94% of urban districts (Carver et al., 2010; Ewing et al., 2023). The parameters for alternative high school transfer defined in typical district policies (e.g. poor grades, behaviors deemed disruptive, pregnancy) intersect with entrenched racialized, gendered, ableist, and classist narratives about histories of structural racism and underinvestment in communities of color (Kim, 2011; Selman, 2017;

Meiners, 2010). For this reason, scholars have speculated that when students of color, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and students diagnosed with disabilities encounter difficulties in mainstream schools, they are differentially targeted for alternative high school transfer (Selman, 2017; Fedders, 2017). This suggests that alternative high school transfer is a "release valve" in public education, a way to remove the students deemed too difficult, too expensive, and too much of a liability to educate in mainstream settings (Kelly, 1993).

Concerns about alternative high school transfer are further reflected in the number of lawsuits filed against districts. In 2012 the Southern Poverty Law Center filed a civil rights complaint with the U.S. Department of Education against a Louisiana school district for pushing a disproportionate number of Black students and students with disabilities into alternative schools. These students represented 52-78% of alternative school referrals and were transferred for subjective reports of misconduct including "disrespectful behavior," "use of profanity," "disrupting class," and "horseplay" (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2012). In 2013 the Education Law Center filed a similar complaint with the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice against the Pennsylvania Department of Education. The complaint focused on the "disciplinary placements" of Black students and students with disabilities in alternative schools. The complaint highlighted that the test scores of students enrolled in alternative programs were not assigned to any school once they transferred. Instead, these test scores seemingly disappeared, becoming a part of the district's overall total (Education Law Center, 2013). These lawsuits suggest a chasm between how alternative high schools are framed in policy and the reality of alternative high schools in practice. Alternative high schools are presented as a way to serve students deemed "at-risk" and prevent dropout. However, in reality, alternative high schools may serve to make the public education system appear to operate more successfully than

it actually does. When alternative high schools open in mass, they create an avenue for mainstream schools to remove "problem" students from the school and from metrics.

Transfer to alternative high school evokes longstanding tensions and inequities in the US education system. It is true that mainstream school settings have not and continue to not meet the needs of all students. However, the existence of separate educational settings of uncertain quality designed for historically marginalized students may create an avenue to further push these students away from mainstream schools. My dissertation research engages these tensions from a structural perspective. Conducted in collaboration with Chicago Public Schools (CPS) - where 10% of high school students attend an alternative high school (Education Labs, 2021) – my research aims to closely examine the alternative high school transfer process from multiple perspectives to better identify discrepancies. I offer immediate actionable insight for CPS district administrators and school practitioners as well as contribute to the broader understanding of how school districts can shift their approach to alternative schooling to reduce inequity.

Research Questions and Theoretical Framework

The combination of CPS's large alternative high school student enrollment, implementation of a new alternative high school transfer policy, and commitment to improvement via a research-practice partnership made Chicago an ideal setting to conduct my dissertation research. Over the last decade alternative high school enrollment in Chicago has expanded rapidly; today about 10% of high school students attend one of the 39 alternative high schools in the city (Education Labs, 2021). In response to this expansion and the concern that Black students were being targeted for alternative high school transfer, CPS adopted a new racially-conscious transfer policy in 2020. The policy is the district's first attempt to centralize and regulate student transfer from mainstream settings to alternative high schools. The policy

was also an explicit attempt at improving the conditions and outcomes for Black students in the district. My examination of alternative high school transfer revolves around the context of the new transfer policy. I begin by describing patterns of transfer before the enactment of the policy (RQ1) and then explore the impact of the policy on school practice and families' experiences of transfer (RQ2 & 3):

> (RQ1) To what extent are alternative high school transfer rates at the school-level significantly different across years and related to school-level dropout rates? To what extent are school demographic composition, student perception of instructional quality, and student perception of school climate predictive of alternative high school transfer?
>
> (RQ2) How do school practitioners interpret and enact a racially-conscious, district-wide alternative high school transfer policy?
>
> (RQ3) What narrative dimensions do Black caregivers use to make meaning of alternative high school transfer and the impact transfer had on their family?

In my dissertation I drew on my epistemological commitment to community-engaged feminist scholarship as well as several theoretical foundations: the theory of racialized organizations, QuantCrit, street-level theory, and symbolic criminalization.

Racialized Organizations and QuantCrit

QuantCrit and the theory of racialized organizations are rooted in critical race theory (CRT) and leverage a second method or theory to explain the reproduction of racism (Garcia et al., 2018; Ray, 2019). QuantCrit engages quantitative methods and has five tenets; 1) the challenge of racism is complex and difficult to quantify, 2) numeric data is not neutral, 3) categories are socially constructed, 4) data cannot speak for itself and requires a theoretically, experientially grounded interpretation, and 5) that the usage of data and numbers should be aligned with promoting racial justice (Garcia et al., 2018). Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations draws from organizational studies to trace how organizations embed racism in the repetition of everyday practices through four tenets: 1) shaping the agency of racialized groups,

2) legitimating unequal resource distribution, 3) credentialing whiteness, and 4) racialized decoupling of practices from official or formal procedures (Ray, 2019).

In paper one, I engage QuantCrit and the theory of racialized organizations to counter the neutrality of school-level data and examine their relationship with alternative high school transfer. The literature associated with both these theories is emergent and, to my knowledge, these traditions have not been used together. Scholarship on racialized organizations is small and has relied on qualitative methods. I contribute to this theoretical work by engaging quantitative methods, estimating the relationship between racialized school characteristics and alternative high school transfer across a system. While, qualitative work in the CRT tradition has engaged student voice, much QuantCrit scholarship has used administrative data. I extend QuantCrit by using student measures of instructional quality and school climate in an explicit effort to center the perception of students.

Street-level Theory

I engaged a street-level approach to studying racial inequity, conceptualizing school practitioners as policy actors facing multiple competing goals with case-by-case discretion (Lipsky, 1980; Brodkin, 2011). Discretion was critical to the enactment of CPS's alternative high school transfer policy, which dictated that school principals, deans, counselors, and school social workers oversaw and facilitated alternative high school transfer by submitting transfer requests to the district. While the transfer policy outlined appropriate reasons for transfer and transfer requests are reviewed by district administrators, street-level theory suggests that the impact of racially-conscious transfer policy is determined in schools by practitioners. I use the unique case of racially-conscious policy making to extend conceptual understanding of race in the street-level

literature by demonstrating how discretion can take on a racial character not solely dependent on the racial identity of an individual practitioner.

Symbolic Criminalization

Rios's (2011) theory of symbolic criminalization accounts for processes of criminalization beyond arrest and expulsion, such as when a student's style, manner, academic standing, and needs are labeled deviant. In Rio's theory school practitioners deny symbolically criminalized students "affirmation and dignified treatment through stigmatizing and exclusionary practices" (2011, pg. 39). This facilitates the removal of students from mainstream settings (Cruz & Meyers, 2024). In my dissertation I contribute to the literature on symbolic criminalization in schools and the emerging literature on alternative high school transfer in two ways. First, I provide empirical accounts of transfer that trace how symbolic criminalization facilitates alternative high school transfer as a form of school pushout. Second, I examine how the reach of symbolic criminalization extends beyond individuals to family life. Previous studies of symbolic criminalization have conceptualized these processes individually (Tuck, 2012; Skiba, 2014; Morris, 2016). I extended this work by providing a family-level analysis of alternative high school transfer.

Research Design and Methodology

I employed a mixed method, exploratory sequential design, first qualitatively exploring caregivers' experience of transfer and practitioner discretion in the transfer process (RQ2 & 3), then adjusting quantitative questions and framing based on insights from that analysis (RQ1) (Creswell, 2017). I conducted 31 narrative interviews with 17 district administrators and school practitioners, 14 narrative interviews with 7 caregivers, conducted structured observations of 3 policy trainings, and leveraged administrative data for system-wide analysis of transfer patterns

(Creswell & Ploth, 2016). Data collection and analysis was done at four levels: qualitative data from caregivers, qualitative data from school practitioners, qualitative data from district administrators, and quantitative data across the system. This multi-level, mixed methods design prioritized improving policy administration and school practice as ways to directly intervene on differential transfer to alternative high schools (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Quantitative Analysis

For RQ1 I combined student-level CPS administrative data from the 2008–2020 school years and 5 Essentials survey data administered by the UChicago Consortium. My variable selection, construction, and theorizing was informed by the qualitative analysis which indicated the importance of school context in shaping discretionary transfer patterns and families' experiences. The CPS administrative data included student-level demographic information such as race/ethnicity, sex, special education status, withdrawal date, withdrawal reason, school identifier, grade level, an indicator for living within a school's attendance boundary, and students' residential Census block group. For analysis, student-level data was aggregated at the school by year level. To provide insight on the role of poverty and social status on alternative high school transfer, I included a poverty index based on block-group median income and male employment and a social status index based on block-group mean education and professional employment. The 5 Essentials survey data included student measures of instructional quality and school climate. I used student-level demographic and 5 Essentials survey data to construct predictor variables to describe alternative high school transfer practices at the school by year level. For analysis, I used a combination of bivariate and fixed effects regressions with robust standard errors clustered at the school level.

Qualitative Analysis

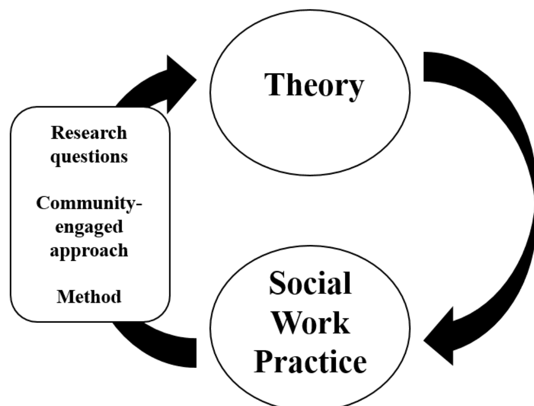
To answer research questions 2 and 3 I merged the traditions of case study and narrative inquiry (Sonday et al, 2020). I first constructed a comparative dual embedded case study of two public high schools, Carver High School and Edison High School (Yin, 2009). I selected Carver and Edison after an extensive case selection process that involved preliminary analysis of administrative data, historical sources, and key informant interviews. Within the dual embedded case study I used narrative inquiry to bring forward practitioner discretion and the experiences of caregivers. The specific narrative techniques I used included longitudinal interviewing, co-construction of story, and visual methods. I used a combination of purposeful and snowball sampling to recruit 12 practitioners as well as 7 caregivers. Additionally, I observed 3 district transfer policy trainings and interviewed 5 district administrators. For RQ3, I engaged narrative thematic analysis (Reissman, 2008). For RQ2, I conducted two rounds of coding in NVivo using the flexible coding method (Deterding and Waters, 2021).

A Social Work Perspective

My dissertation is exemplary of social work research praxis (see Figure 1). Beginning with social work practice, my focus on alternative high school transfer is rooted in 6 years of direct social work practice at the nexus of public education, community mental health, and the juvenile legal system. In one of my recent roles as a community-based social worker, I noticed that the young people on my caseload entangled in the criminal legal system were transferring into alternative high schools. In therapy sessions clients would ask me about alternative high school transfer, “Sam should I transfer? I am being told I can catch up on credits and graduate quickly. There will also be more help for me in the alternative school.” Without knowing much about alternative high schools, I reinforced what they had been told by a counselor or administrator at their mainstream school, “Sure that sounds like a good opportunity.” As a

community-based social worker I was able to move with the young person and continue providing services while they attended alternative high schools. I was disappointed in what I saw there.

Figure 1: Social work research praxis



The alternative high schools did not have the vocational programs or support services promised on their websites, if any at all. Without supportive services and the expectation that students would work independently on computers, it was hard for young people to accrue credits in the alternative settings. None of the students on my caseload graduated early and some left alternative high schools with no diploma. Despite being advertised for "at-risk" students who had experienced barriers in mainstream schools, alternative high schools were housed in strip malls and formerly closed elementary schools. The alternative schools often felt like jails. While I was able to move freely, students had to be escorted to bathrooms and the end of every hall was considered a "check point" where students were subjected to searches. In addition to being horrified by the system, I was frustrated with myself. Without knowing much about alternative high schools, I had reinforced to students that transfer would "work out" for them. I had played a role in facilitating the containment of Black students in alternative high schools. It is from this

place of accountability as a practitioner in the system that I came to be curious and passionate about better understanding the movement of students into alternative high schools.

I continued to foster accountability in my dissertation research by co-constructing my research questions with CPS partners. Given the stakes of alternative high school transfer I witnessed in my own practice, I wanted to ensure that my dissertation work was not just interesting or novel but could be immediately useful to CPS and to families navigating the system. After several months of conversations, my CPS partners and I decided that the project would focus on the interpretation and enactment of the district's alternative high school transfer policy. My partners articulated their priorities: did the policy shift how practitioners mobilized alternative high school transfer and did the policy protect students' legal right to remain in mainstream schools? From these priorities I constructed my research questions and methods.

In addition to my research questions and community-engaged approach being rooted in social work, my choice of method was informed by social work practice. As a practitioner I facilitated narrative arts-based therapy with young people and their families. When constructing my narrative data collection and analytic protocols I drew from this expertise to 1) bring forward the stories of those most impacted by alternative high school transfer, 2) not dilute a structural analysis of power to an analysis of individual bias in the transfer process, and 3) facilitate a trauma-informed, empowering experience for practitioners and caregivers. I believe that my practice knowledge was essential to the success of my qualitative process. There are many ways to facilitate qualitative interviews skillfully. However, the ability to guide a co-constructive narrative process that is meaningful to the participant as well as create rich qualitative data for analysis, is a unique skill I offer as a practice-informed scholar. My choice to engage QuantCrit was also informed by my practice experience. As a practitioner, I was aware that I created the

administrative data that would later be used to evaluate the effectiveness of my practice, a particular modality, or justify a shift in policy. QuantCrit allowed me to draw on my practice knowledge to provide experientially grounded interpretation of statistical results.

Summary

A separate system of schools that differentially serves historically marginalized students in large numbers is troubling (Fedders, 2017). Policy discourse frames alternative high schools as a dropout prevention strategy. However, this framing was constructed without empirical insight into the system-wide patterns of alternative high school transfer, practitioner discretion in the transfer process, or families' firsthand accounts of transfer. When knowledge about a process or part of the education system is built at such a distance from lived experience, it raises concerns of epistemic and educational injustice. In collaboration with CPS, my dissertation explores the discrepancy between the stated aims of alternative high schools and the reality of practice on the ground by centering the voices of those most impacted by alternative high school transfer.

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What Factors are Associated with Alternative High School Transfer?: A QuantCrit Examination of School-level Characteristics

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Abstract: Policy frames alternative high school transfer as a dropout prevention strategy. Conversely, critical legal scholars have suggested that alternative high school transfer is a form of pushout. I leverage novel data of Chicago Public Schools to examine the school-level characteristics that predict alternative high school transfer. In bivariate analyses demographic composition, instructional quality, and school climate variables are predictive of increased alternative high school transfer. However, in fixed effect regression models only demographic composition and instructional quality are associated with increased alternative high school transfer. These results are interpreted using the theory of racialized organizations and QuantCrit. I close with implications for district administrators.

[2] This is my way of acting in solidarity with Palestinian people and putting into practice my social work values.

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Introduction

On average 7.7% of Black students and 5.5% of Latine students, compared to 4.1% of white[3] students, leave high school without graduating (NCES, 2021). In education discourse this racial disproportionality is framed as "dropout" or "pushout." Critical education scholars argue the latter, maintaining that students do not "dropout" of school instead they are "pushed out" of schools by taken for granted aspects of the education system (Garica et al., 2024). This framing of "pushout" has been effective in problematizing previously accepted school policies and practices. For example, once thought of as a way to remove "dangerous" students from schools, suspension and expulsion are now widely understood as racialized forms of social control that make it difficult for students of color to remain engaged in school (Morris, 2016).

However, the experiences of over half a million students who transfer into alternative high schools each year remain unaddressed in the "dropout" vs. "pushout" discourse (Carver et al., 2010). Alternative high schools are defined in policy as schools designed for students who have disengaged from school due to poor grades, lack of attendance, behaviors labeled disruptive, as well as the need to work and provide family care—in other words, students at risk of "dropout" (Carver et al., 2010). In fact, the Institute for Education Sciences (IES) What Works Clearing House names alternative high schools as a strategy to prevent dropout, framing them as "small learning communities" that can provide "at-risk students…personalized communities to facilitate monitoring and support" (pg. 47, 2017). Essentially rather than students dropping out of school, IES suggests that districts can transfer students to alternative high schools.

[3] The decision to not capitalize white is rooted in an anti-racist politic and is my way of engaging QuantCrit throughout the research process

What is not accounted for in IES's What Works Clearinghouse are rampant issues of privatization and transparency in the alternative high school ecosystem. In 2010 in was estimated that 94% of urban districts in the US had at least one alternative high school, with the majority operated by a handful of for-profit companies or corporate like Charter Management Organizations (Carver et al., 2010; Vogell et al., 2017). The number of alternative high schools increased by 21% between 2000-2008 with a third of these programs reporting that they were unable to respond to new enrollment requests due to staff/spacing limitations (Carver et al., 2010). Despite the increase in alternative high schools and their designation as a "dropout prevention strategy" there are no federal or state standards for the quality of academic curriculum or support services provided in alternative settings (Carver et al., 2010; Vogell et al., 2017; Fedders, 2017). Alternative high schools are also segregated spaces. Students enrolled in alternative high schools are overwhelmingly more likely to be Black, diagnosed with a disability, and/or experience poverty than the overall population of the district in which such schools are located (Perzigian et al., 2017; Phillippi et al., 2021; Education Labs, 2021).

For these reasons, critical scholars have speculated that the presence of alternative high school in a district widens the net for what student academic standings and needs constitute grounds for removal from mainstream schools (Fedders, 2017). These speculations are corroborated by the lawsuits filed against districts for their use of alternative high schools. In 2012 the Southern Poverty Law Center filed a civil rights complaint against a Louisiana school district for using alternative high school transfer as a way to remove Black students and students with disabilities from mainstream schools. These student groups represented 52-78% of alternative school referrals and were transferred for subjective reports of misconduct including "disrespectful behavior," "use of profanity," "disrupting class," and "horseplay" (Southern

Poverty Law Center, 2012). In 2013 the Education Law Center filed a similar complaint with the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice against the Pennsylvania Department of Education. The complaint challenged the "disciplinary placements" of Black students in alternative schools and highlighted that the test scores of students enrolled in alternative programs were not assigned to any school once they transferred. Instead, these test scores seemingly disappeared, becoming a part of the district's overall total (Education Law Center, 2013). These lawsuits suggest a chasm between the framing of alternative high schools as dropout prevention and the reality of alternative high schools in practice. When alternative high schools open in mass, they create an avenue for mainstream schools to remove "problem" students from the school and from metrics.

There is an inherent tension in the notion of alternative school transfer. On one hand, mainstream school settings may indeed be ill-suited to the needs of some students. On the other hand, the existence of an unaccountable separate system may produce perverse incentives to pushout historically marginalized students from mainstream schools. This study addresses the tension of "dropout" and "pushout" through quantitative analysis addressing two core research questions:

1) *Is there a difference in alternative high school transfer rates at the school-level across years? Are those transfer rates related to school-level dropout rates?*
2) *To what extent are well-established predictors of pushout, such as school demographic composition, instructional quality, and school climate, also predictive of alternative high school transfer?*

These questions stem from a need to draw attention to alternative high school transfer as a potential form of school pushout and invisible mechanism of racial inequity in the education system. What follows is a summarization of what is known about alternative high school transfer and the known characteristics that predict school pushout. To guide my analysis of alternative

high school transfer in Chicago Public Schools (CPS), I draw on two frameworks: QuantCrit and the theory of racialized organizations. I then offer a discussion section which describes how the findings relate to potential implications for policy, practice, and future research on alternative high school transfer.

Background

What is Known About Alternative High School Transfer

Alternative schools have been grouped into three types- schools of choice, behavior reassignment, and academic recovery (Raywid, 1994). Currently most alternative high schools in the United States could be classified as academic recovery, "locales for students who experience credit deficiencies or are otherwise off-track academically toward high school completion" (Perzigian et al., 2016, pg, 1). These schools are thought to provide individualized instruction through computer-based courses alongside additional support services. However, given the privatization of alternative high schools it is impossible to systematically guarantee that support services are present in the school or even that classroom teachers are certified to work in the states where the district is located (Vogell, et al., 2017).

Students enrolled in academic recovery alternative high schools are often referred by their mainstream school with encouragement from school personnel. However, even scholars that frame alternative high school transfer as dropout prevention, acknowledge that this referral process is only "theoretically rooted in academic need" (Perzigian et al., 2016, pg, 3). Critical scholarship into pre-transfer moments have led to speculation that Black and Latine students are pushed to alternative high school settings for being labeled academic or behavioral problems (Fedders, 2017; Selman, 2017). Cruz & Meyers (2024) found that practitioners deployed strategies to hasten transfer and understood they could use alternative high school transfer to

remove problematized students. Ways of "working" alternative high school included provoking students to leave school, making students uncomfortable so they do not come to school, the use of culturally misaligned curriculum, and harsh instruction practices such as "putting students on the spot" (pg. 18). Over time these tactics of pushout would impact a student's grades and make the student appear on paper as a good candidate for transfer to alternative high schools for academic remediation. Insights into these pre-transfer moments combined with pervasive segregation in the alternative high school system challenges the benevolent conception of alternative high school transfer as academic remediation.

Known Characteristics that Predict Pushout

Much of the literature on school pushout has examined exclusionary discipline, such as suspension and expulsion. Given the now-extensive literature on carceral logics and practices in schools, it is unsurprising that historically marginalized students at the intersection of race, gender, class, and disability are more likely to experience exclusionary discipline (Annamma, 2017; Gregory et al., 2010; Meiners, 2001; Morris, 2016). Male students make up 51% of the education system but account for 70% of out of school suspensions (Petras et al., 2011). Students of low socioeconomic status receive higher rates of suspension and expulsion (Nichols, 2004; Petras et al., 2011). Black students consistently remain overrepresented across disciplinary outcomes including classroom referrals, out of school suspension and, expulsion (Skiba et al., 2014a; Skiba et al., 2014b). Similar disproportionality in school discipline has been documented for Latine students and students with disabilities (Peguero & Shekarkhar, 2011; Losen & Gillespie, 2012).

While helpful in emphasizing who bears the brunt of pushout, these studies do not consider how adult perception of student identities is embedded within and shaped by social

context. Qualitative literature has traced how organizational characteristics (e.g. expectations of students in the classroom and school climate) structure practitioners' perception of students' racial identity and thus shapes how practitioners deploy exclusionary practices (Drake, 2022; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Ray, 2019). The importance of contextualizing racism as a predictor of pushout organizationally is similarly reflected in the quantitative literature. For example, schools with higher percentages of Black and Latine students have been associated with increased exclusionary practices such as office referrals, out of school suspensions, and expulsions (Payne and Welch, 2010; Skiba et al., 2013). However, Black girls' risk of in-school suspension and arrest has also been found to increase in racially/ethnically diverse schools (Williams et al., 2022).

The above literature emphasizes the complex, non-linear interaction between school racial composition, adult practices, and outcomes. Instructional quality, and school climate are amongst the most theorized school-level predictors of school pushout (Deschenes et al., 2001, Eccles and Roeser, 2009; Drake, 2022; Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Relevant measurements include the impact of culturally unresponsive instruction, and racialized adult perception of appropriate student presentation and behavior (Chang and Sue, 2003, Downey and Pribesh, 2004; Neal et al., 2003). These measures of instructional quality and school climate consider how adult attitudes and approaches to school practice may interact with racial bias and contribute to the trend of harsher consequences for Black and Latine students (Hannon et al., 2013; Payne and Welch, 2010). Less is known about how students' perception of adult practices related to instructional quality and school climate may be associated with pushout. For example, it is possible that poor instructional quality may signal to students of color that their learning is not important. Similarly, "rigorous" instructional quality may include exclusionary techniques (e.g.

putting a student on the spot when asking a question) and make students of color feel that school is not designed for them. In such cases, both student perceptions could contribute to alternative high school transfer.

Theoretical Frameworks

QuantCrit is rooted in critical race theory (CRT) and leverages quantitative methods to critique mechanisms of racial social control (Bell, 2004; Garcia et al., 2018). QuantCrit draws on sociological theories of race to decouple statistics from racialized power and articulate the subjectivity of numerical data (DuBois, 1899; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008; Zuberi, 2001). QuantCrit has five tenets; 1) the challenge of racism is complex and difficult to quantify, 2) numeric data is not neutral, 3) categories are socially constructed, 4) data cannot speak for itself and requires a theoretically, experientially grounded interpretation, and 5) that the usage of data and numbers should be aligned with promoting racial justice (Gillborn et al., 2018).

Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations draws from CRT and organizational studies to trace how organizations embed racism through the repetition of everyday practices (Stewart et al., 2021). Racialized organizations maintain a socially constructed racial hierarchy by attaching racial schemas in the surrounding institutional environment to organizational resources. By utilizing Sewell's (1992) broad definition of racial schemas as "fundamental tools of thought" and resources as "media of power," Ray suggests that racial schemas can be expansively conceptualized to include schemas a of racial social control and organizational resources can encompass various forms of power (e.g. classroom time, space in a school, school climate). The theory of racialized organizations has four tenets that describe how organizations enforce racial inequities: 1) shaping the agency of racialized groups, 2) legitimating unequal

resource distribution, 3) credentialing whiteness, and 4) racialized decoupling of practices from official or formal procedures (Ray, 2019).

Schools are racialized organizations and, for a myriad of reasons, produce longstanding inequities in the education system (Stewart et al., 2021). Examples of racialized organizational processes include the use of exclusionary discipline, the largely white female composition of the teaching workforce, inadequate supports in the classroom, lack of resources, and an adverse school climate (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Skiba et al., 2014; Skiba et al., 2003). In his ethnographic study of alternative school transfer, Drake (2022) found that a mainstream school's instructional quality and school climate were cultivated by racialized organizational processes and contributed to the transfer of Black students to an alternative high school. In the middle- and upper-class, racially diverse high school where "excellent" academic performance was normed and expected, students who struggled to meet these high expectations were labeled failures. Drawing on racial stereotypes in the institutional environment, academic excellence in the school became linked to highly racialized stereotypes about Korean American students as "model minorities" and Black students as "unmotivated." Thus, transfer to alternative high schools became a way to remove problematized Black students.

In Drake's (2022) study, the racialized movement of Black students to an alternative high school occurred despite the mainstream school's reputation as a "good school" with excellent instructional quality and a positive school climate. Notably, this "desirable" reputation did not prevent, and arguably facilitated, the transfer of Black students to an alternative high school. Much of the school improvement literature perceives higher measures of instructional quality and school climate to be associated with increased learning for all students (Hart et al., 2020). However, these qualitative studies demonstrate that high instructional quality and school climate

ratings do not universally translate to positive school outcomes for Black and Latine students and may in fact contribute to alternative high school transfer (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Drake, 2022).

I engage QuantCrit and the theory of racialized organizations to counter the neutrality of school-level metrics and examine their relationship with alternative high school transfer. Thus, I understand my predictor variables of interest- school racial composition, school instructional quality, and school climate- to reflect racialized organizational processes (Ray, 2019; Stewart et al., 2021). Scholarship on racialized organizations is emergent and has largely used qualitative methods to trace how processes within organizations reproduce the US racial hierarchy. I contribute to this theoretical work by engaging quantitative methods, estimating the relationship between racialized school characteristics and alternative high school transfer across a system. Lastly, while qualitative work in the CRT tradition as amplified the need for student voice, much QuantCrit scholarship has countered the neutrality of administrative data. I extend QuantCrit by leveraging student measures of instructional quality and school climate as a way to center the perceptions of those who are most impacted by alternative high school transfer.

Alternative High School Transfer in Chicago Public Schools

Alternative high school transfer in CPS mirrors the student-level patterns described above. In Chicago, from 2011 to 2016, the number of alternative high schools expanded from 9 to 48 (Education Labs, 2021). This expansion was facilitated by privatization with the majority of alternative high schools being operated by a single CMO (CPS, 2024). Unsurprisingly, student enrollment in Chicago alternative high schools has paralleled the expansion. In 2009, 5,722 students attended an alternative high school. In 2020, 11,031 students were enrolled in an alternative high school (Education Labs, 2021). Currently, it is estimated that 1 in 10 high school

students in the city attends one of the available 39 alternative high schools (Education Labs, 2021).

Compared to the population of students in mainstream high schools, alternative high school students in Chicago are more likely to identify as Black (35% vs. 60%), have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) (16% vs. 21%), and qualify for free or reduced lunch (76% vs. 84%). Forthcoming research has indicated that the majority of CPS students who transfer to alternative high schools are at least a grade level behind on credits and are "chronically absent" (Hinze-Pifer, forthcoming). Lastly, transfer into alternative high schools should be considered a consequential moment in a student's educational trajectory. Education Labs (2021) found that 93% of students who enroll in an alternative high school in Chicago do not reengage mainstream settings and 61.4% of alternative high school students do not graduate high school. The combination of CPS's large number of mainstream high schools and large alternative high school enrollment makes the district an ideal context to examine the characteristics that predict transfer and develop practice-relevant insights. My analysis addresses two core research questions:

1) Is there a difference in alternative high school transfer rates at the school-level across years? Are those transfer rates related to school-level dropout rates?
2) To what extent are well-established predictors of pushout, such as school demographic composition, instructional quality, and school climate, also predictive of alternative high school transfer?

Methods

My interest in alternative high school transfer arose from previous experience working with students who transferred from mainstream schools into alternative high schools. I have an array of personal and professional experiences in public schools, all underscored by the experience of white racial privilege. Therefore, I approached the analysis with an obligation to interrogate the racialized organizational characteristics associated with alternative high school

transfer rather than contribute to race-evasive analyses of individual student characteristics. This analysis is part of a larger research-practice partnership with CPS.

Data

I used student-level CPS administrative data from the 2008–2020 school years, as well as 5 Essentials survey data administered by the UChicago Consortium to all high school students in spring 2009 and 2011–2020. CPS administrative data included student-level demographic information, including race/ethnicity, sex, special education status, withdrawal date, withdrawal reason, school identifier, grade level, an indicator for living within a school's attendance boundary, and students' residential Census block group. I included a poverty index based on block-group median income and male employment and a social status index based on block-group mean education and professional employment. Measures from the 5 Essentials survey included student measures of instructional quality and school climate. I used student-level demographic and 5 Essentials survey data to construct predictor variables to describe alternative high school transfer practices at the school by year level.

Variables

Dependent Variable

In this study I assess one dependent variable, transfer to alternative high schools. I constructed the dependent variable using CPS student enrollment information which included school code, grade level, date of enrollment, and date of withdrawal. I generated the variable as follows: $AlternativeHighSchoolTransfer_{year}/SchoolPopulation_{year}*(100)=PercentageofAlternativeTranfser_{year}$ with $PercentageofAlternativeTranfser_{year}$ representing the percentage of students transferring from a mainstream school to alternative high schools in a given year. Given variation in student population across schools, structuring this

outcome variable as rate of transfer is best practice (Fleurence & Hollenbeak, 2007). Included in this variable are 9th-12th grade students who were enrolled in a mainstream CPS high school one semester and then enrolled in an alternative high school the following semester. In cases where a student had a gap in enrollment between the mainstream school and alternative high school, transfer was counted at the mainstream high school in the academic year the student left school. In cases where a student finished the academic year in a mainstream high school and enrolled in an alternative high school over the Summer or in the Fall of the following academic year, mobility was counted at the mainstream high school in the previous academic year. I did not include students who completed 8th grade and enrolled directly into an alternative high school.

School Demographic Composition

There are several concepts of interest in this study- the association between school dropout, school demographic composition, student perception of school instructional quality, and student perception of school climate on alternative high school transfer. The dependent variables for school demographic composition include*: (1) percentage students in a school who identify as Black, Latine, Asian or white, (2) percentage students in a school who have an active Individual Education Plan and are receiving disability services, (3) percentage female students in a school, (4) measure of concentrated poverty at the school-level, (5) measure of social status at the school-level, (6) percentage of students who left high school without graduating, (7) percentage of students in a school who reside within their enrolled school's attendance boundary,* and *(8) changes in student enrollment at the school-level by 100.*

The 6 school composition variables are continuous variables. The school composition variables were retrieved from CPS administrative data and are calculated by taking the count of students in each of these categories, dividing it by the total school population, and then

multiplying the proportion by 100. All of these predictors vary over time. The 7th variable listed above estimates to what extent participation in CPS's choice program amongst enrolled students at the school-level in a given year is associated with alternative high school transfer. Between 2002 and 2010 reforms in CPS expanded the number of charter schools in the district and created a choice program at the high school level (Barrow & Sartain, 2017). The 8th independent variable is a categorical variable that represents a change in student enrollment by 100 at a school in a given year. In 2014 CPS adopted a student-based budgeting model where schools' budgets were based on the number of students enrolled (Barrow et al., 2017). Thus, this variable is a proxy for drastic increases or decreases to a school's material resources.

Independent variables 4 and 5 are *SCON*, a measure of concentrated poverty, and *SSOC*, a measure of social status. *SCON* is a measure of concentrated poverty at the school level with a high number indicating higher levels of poverty concentration in the environments students reside in. The measure is calculated from Census block data (the percent of adult males employed and the percent of families with incomes above the poverty line), and is standardized such that a "0" value is the mean value for census block groups in Chicago. *SSOC* was calculated in the same manner as the poverty concentration variable (*SCON*) with a high positive value reflecting a high block group social status. The Census variables used for *SSOC* are mean level of education of adults and the percentage of employed persons who work as managers or professionals. *SCON* and *SSOC* are correlated with free or reduced lunch and, especially in the context of CPS where over 70% of students in a given year qualify for free or reduced lunch, are more precise measures of poverty and social status at the school-level (Domina et al., 2018).

Student Perception of Instructional Quality & School Climate

Student measures of instructional quality and school climate were taken from the 5 Essentials survey data administered by the UChicago Consortium. The framework for the 5 Essentials was first developed in the 1990's as a way of studying school progress during a time of mass district-wide reforms in Chicago (Hart, 2020). The 5 Essentials have been validated over 20 years of research in Chicago demonstrating that an increase in these measures increases a school's ability to improve students' learning over time (Davis et al., 2021). For the purpose of this analysis, I pulled student survey responses for measures underlying concepts of "ambitious instruction," students are challenged by well-organized curricula, and "supportive environment," the school is a safe, nurturing, and stimulating environment focused on learning for all students, aggregated to means at the school by year level. Measures included (1) *Academic Expectation*, (2) *Math Instruction*, (3) *English Instruction*, (4) *Science Instruction*, (5) *Course Clarity*, (6) *Classroom Rigor*, (7) *Student-Teacher Trust*, and (8) *School-wide Future Orientation* (see Table 1).

Table 1. Measurement definitions

Measures	Survey Type	Description
Measures of Instructional Quality		
Academic Press	Student	Teachers expect students to do their best and to meet academic demands
Math Instruction	Student	Students interact with course material and one another to build and apply knowledge in their math classes
English Instruction	Student	Students interact with course material and one another to build and apply critical reading and writing skills
Science Instruction	Student	Students interact with course material and one another to build and apply knowledge in their science classes
Course Clarity	Student	Students' views about what they need to do to succeed in the target class, their learning from feedback, and how helpful the homework and class work are
Classroom Rigor	Student	Whether or not teachers encourage all students to make connections and seek multiple perspectives through their coursework
Measures of School Climate		
Student-Teacher Trust	Student	Students and teachers share a high level of mutual trust and respect
School-wide Future Orientation	Student	The school engages all students in planning for life after graduation

I conceptualize variables 1-6 as student measures of instructional quality and variables 7 and 8 as student measures of school climate. From 2008-2010 the survey was administered to all high school students in odd years and then administrated annually from 2011-onward. This meant data was missing for years 2009 and 2010. I addressed missing data by creating school-level averages between the previous year and the following year: $(Measure_{year)} * (Measure_{year)} / 2 = InBetweenMeasure_{year.}$ The 5 Essentials is administered to all CPS high school students in the spring of the academic year. Previous work has demonstrated that alternative high school transfer in CPS has temporal patterns with frequency of transfer at the school-level increasing at the beginning of the fall semester and at the end of the fall semester transitioning into the spring semester (Hinze-Pifer, forthcoming). Therefore, it is likely that most of the students who transferred to alternative high schools have already left the mainstream school when the 5 Essentials survey was administered. To ensure that the perspectives of students most likely to transfer are included, I set the 5 Essentials measures to the previous academic year. I normed each of the 5 Essential measures to have a mean of zero and standard deviation of 1 within the sample so that the coefficient can be interpreted within a 1 standard deviation change in the measure.

Analytic Sample

The original sample included 244 schools across 13 years constructed as panel data unique at the school by year level for a total of 2,192 observations. After dropping charter high schools, alternative high schools, and district-run mainstream high schools with less than 20% of data (2 years or less), the final sample was reduced to 137 schools across 13 years for a total of 1,399 observations with data evenly distributed across years (see Table 2). In the final sample

alternative high school transfer, as the dependent variable, was missing at 0%. Independent variables were missing from 7.37% to 9.23%.

Table 2. Number of schools by year in sample (N=1,399)

Year	Number of Observations
2008	103
2009	111
2010	119
2011	113
2012	110
2013	113
2014	112
2015	110
2016	104
2017	105
2018	101
2019	100
2020	98

Analytic Approach

To answer the first research question, *To what extent are school transfer rates at the school-level significantly different across years and associated with dropout?*, I ran a regression of percent dropout rates on alternative high school transfer estimating the difference in transfer rates across years (Figure 2). Also

Figure 2: Regression Equation

$$\text{AlternativeHighSchoolTransfer} = \alpha + \beta\text{Dropout} + \varepsilon$$

To answer the second and third research questions, *To what extent are school racial, disability, sex, poverty, and social status composition as well as school resources and participation in choice programs associated with alternative high school transfer?* and *To what extent are student perception of school instructional quality and school climate associated with alternative high school transfer (*Figure 3*)*, I conducted bivariate regressions to estimate the relationship between each independent variable and alternative high school transfer with robust standard errors clustered at the school level. I then leveraged fixed effect regressions with robust

standard errors clustered at the school level for each of the concepts of interest -school demographic composition, student perception of school instructional quality, and student perception of school climate- on rate of transfer (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Bivariate regression with robust standard errors clustered at the school level

$AlternativeHighSchoolTranfser_{it} = \alpha_i + \beta_1 School\text{-}LevelVariable_{it} + \varepsilon_{it}$

To answer the fourth and fifth research questions, *To what extent are the associations between school demographic composition and student perception of instructional quality predictive of alternative high school transfer?* and *To what extent are the associations between school demographic composition and student perception of school climate predictive of alternative high school transfer?*, I ran two final fixed effect regressions with robust standard errors clustered at the school level estimating the association of school demographic composition and student perception of instructional quality/student perception of school climate on the rate of alternative high school transfer (Figure 4). All the models were specified in Stata with the panel data described above, using the *xtset* command to set the time variable as year and the clustering variable as school. I followed each fixed effect regression model with Stata's *vif, uncentered* command to assess for collinearity. Based on collinearity, I decided to drop the school demographic composition variables Asian and white from the fixed effect regression models. I assess the results of these models and examine the association of school demographic composition, student perception of school instructional quality, and student perception of school climate on rate of alternative high school transfer.

Figure 4: Fixed effect regression with robust standard errors clustered at the school level

$AlternativeHighSchoolTransfer_{it}=\beta_1 School\text{-}levelVariable_{1,it}+\cdots+\beta_k School\text{-}levelVariable_{k,it}+\alpha_i+ \varepsilon_{it}$

Results

Descriptive Characteristics of the Sample

The full descriptive characteristics of the sample is available in Table 3. In the sample, schools on average had a 53.79% Black student body and 35.79% Latine student body. On average, schools had 22.21% of students receiving disability services, a 47% female student body, high concentrations of poverty amongst enrolled students (.39) and low social status amongst enrolled students (-.42). Schools had an average dropout rate of .06% and an average enrollment of 914.52 students with 25.43% of enrolled students residing in the attendance boundary. Regarding measures of instructional quality, on average students perceived schools' Academic Expectation to be 1.65, Math Instruction to be -3.26, English Instruction to be -9.05, Science Instruction to be 1.07, Classroom Clarity to be 9.54, and Classroom Rigor to be --9.46. Regarding measures of school climate, on average students perceived schools' Student-Teacher Trust to be 7.32 and School-wide Future Orientation to be -1.16.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of school sample

	Variable	Mean (SD)
School Demographic Variables		
Race		
	Black	53.79 (37.04)
	Latine	35.79 (32.05)
	Asian	.02 (.05)
	white	.06 (.11)
Special Education Status		
	Students with IEP	22.21 (22.44)
Sex		
	Female	.47 (.10)
Measures of Poverty and Social Status		
	SSCON	.39 (.43)
	SSOC	-.42 (.49)
Dropout		
	Dropout	.06 (.07)
Enrollment		
	Enrollment	9.14 (7.70)
Percent Students Residing Attendance Boundary		
	Zone	25.43 (31.73)
Measures of School-level Instructional Quality		
	Academic Expectation	1.65 (1)
	Math Instruction	-3.26 (1)
	English Instruction	-9.05 (1)
	Science Instruction	1.07 (1)
	Classroom Clarity	9.54 (1)
	Classroom Rigor	-9.46 (1)
Measures of School-level Climate		
	Student-Teacher Trust	7.32 (1)
	School-wide Future Orientation	-1.16 (1)

Research Question 1

Percentage dropout at the school-level is significantly associated with an increase rate of alternative high school transfer each year between 2008 and 2020 (see Table 4). To illustrate the association between dropout and transfer during a period of alternative high school expansion in CPS, Figure 4 displays percentage dropout at the school level in 2008, before the expansion, and 2020, after the expansion. The comparison between these histograms demonstrates that more schools have higher percentages of student dropout in 2008 than 2020, indicating a possible shift in school practices regarding transfer. Figure 5 displays the association between percent dropout

and transfer rate in 2008 and 2020 weighting school enrollment size. While both scatterplots display a relationship between percentage student dropout and transfer rate, in 2008 schools have higher rates of dropout and lower rates of transfer. In comparison, schools in 2020 have lower rates of dropout and higher rates of transfer. This indicates that school practices of dropout and alternative high school transfer are associated and have shifted between 2008 and 2020.

Table 4. School dropout predicting transfer

Year	β	SE	P>t	[95% conf. interval]	
2008	.519	.068	.00	.384	.653
2009	.930	.106	.00	.720	1.140
2010	1.034	.109	.00	.819	1.249
2011	.740	.074	.00	.594	.885
2012	.814	.112	.00	.594	1.035
2013	.744	.105	.00	.537	.951
2014	.926	.111	.00	.708	1.144
2015	.827	.110	.00	.612	1.043
2016	.904	.117	.00	.674	1.134
2017	.682	.101	.00	.482	.882
2018	.733	.120	.00	.496	.970
2019	.830	.142	.00	.551	1.109
2020	.667	.179	.00	.315	1.019

Figure 5. Histogram of dropout at the school-level in 2008 and 2020

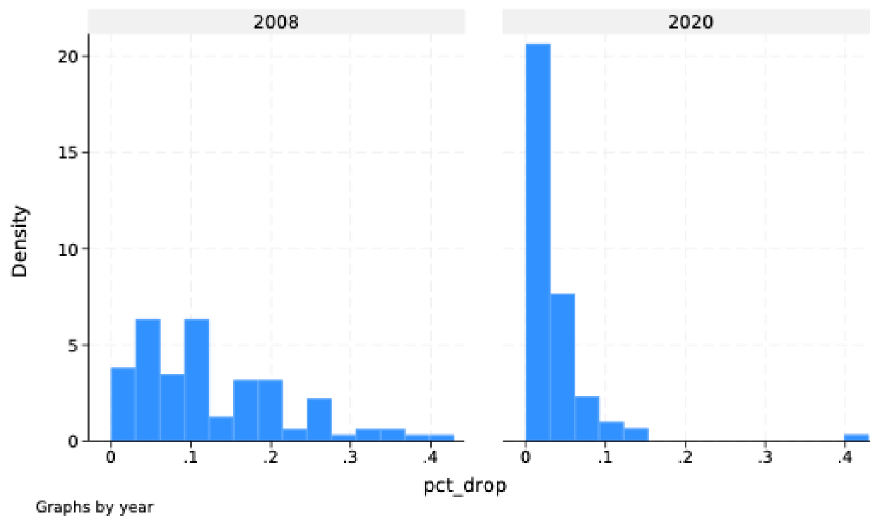
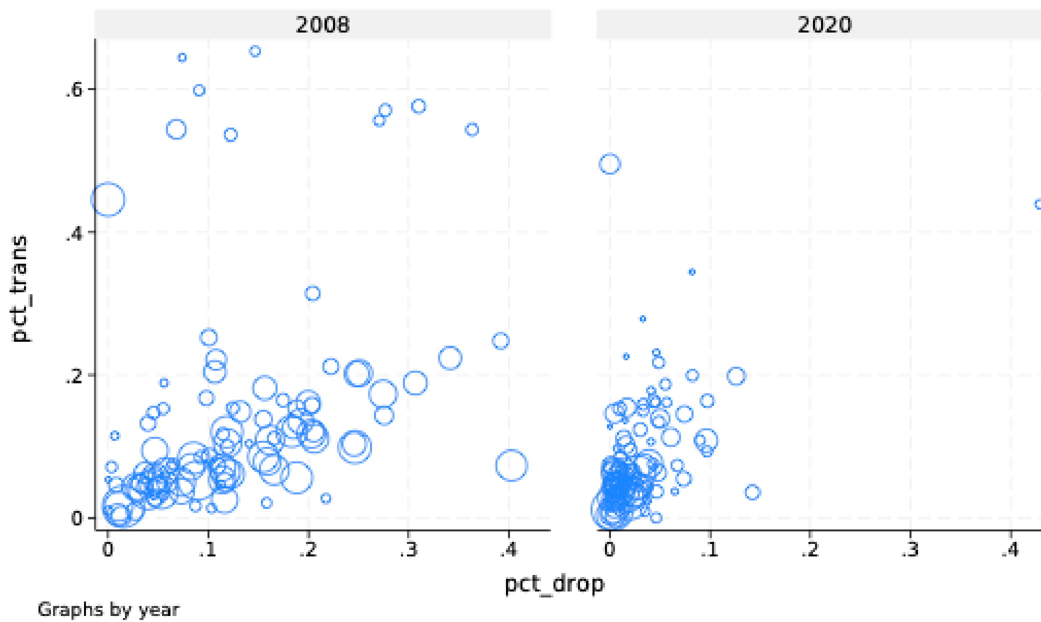


Figure 6. Scatterplot of dropout and transfer at the school-level in 2008 and 2020



Research Question 2 and 3

Bivariate Regressions

Several school demographic composition variables are significant predictors of rate of alternative high school transfer (see Table 5). An increase in the percent of Black students in a school is associated with a decreased rate of transfer (β= -0.00045, p=0.043). An increase in the percent of students in a school receiving disability services is associated with an increased rate of transfer (β= 0.022, p=0.000) and an increase in the percent of female students is associated with a decrease in rate of transfer (β= -0.13, p=0.000). An increase of concentrated poverty at the school-level is associated with an increase of transfer rate (β= 0.071, p=0.000) while decrease in social status at the school level is associated with a decrease in rate of transfer (β= -0.063, p=0.000). An increase in enrollment by 100 students is associated with a decreased rate of transfer (β= -0.037, p=0.000).

Many measures of student perception of instructional quality and school climate were significant and associated with an increase in rate of transfer. An increase in student perception of Academic Expectation is associated with an increase in rate of transfer (β=0. 010, p=0.000). An increase in student perception of Math Instruction (β=0.0080, p=0.000), English Instruction (β=0.0054, p=0.001), and Science Instruction (β=0.0049, p=0.001) is associated with an increase in rate of transfer. Similarly, an increase in student perception of Course Clarity (β=0.0090, p=0.000) is associated with an increase in rate of transfer. An increase in student perception of Student-Teacher Trust (β=0.011, p=0.000) and School-Wide Future Orientation (β=0.0099, p=0.000) is associated with an increase in rate of transfer.

Table 5. Bivariate regression results predicting transfer

		β	SE	P>t	[95% conf. interval]	
School Demographic Variables Race						
	Black	-.00045	.00022	.043*	-.0009	-.000014
	Latine	.00042	.00022	.057	-.000012	.00086
	Asian	.081	.059	.173	-.035	.19
	white	.00097	.033	.97	-.064	.066
Special Education Status						
	Students with IEP	.0022	.00035	.000***	.0015	.0029
Sex						
	Female	-.13	.037	.000***	-.21	-.064
Measures of Poverty and Social Status						
	SSCON	.071	.013	.000***	.043	.098
	SSOC	-.063	.016	.000***	-.095	-.03
Dropout						
	Dropout	.031	.02	.126	-.0088	.071
Increase in Enrollment						
	Enrollment	-.0037	.00058	.000**	-.0048	-.0025
Percent Students Residing Attendance Boundary						
	Zone	-.00014	.00017	.395	-.00049	.00019
Measures of School-level Instructional Quality						
	Academic Expectation	.010	.001	.000***	.0077	.013
	Math Instruction	.0080	.002	.000***	.0042	.011
	English Instruction	.0054	.002	0.001**	.0022	.0085
	Science Instruction	.0049	.001	0.001**	.0021	.0077
	Course Clarity	.0090	.001	.000***	.0062	.011
	Classroom Rigor	-.000049	.002	.978	-.0036	.0035
Measures of School-level Climate						
	Student-Teacher Trust	.010	.002	.000***	.0069	.013
	School-wide Future Orientation	.0099	.002	.000***	.0062	.013

Note: p value is *>0.05 **>0.01 ***>0.001

Fixed Effect Regression Models

The full results of school demographic composition predicting rate of alternative high school transfer are available in Table 6. When included in a fixed effect regression with other demographic variables, an increase in the percentage of Black students remains associated with a decrease in the rate of transfer (β= -0.0012, p=0.002) while an increase in the percentage of Latine students becomes associated with a decrease in the rate of transfer (β= -.0010, p=0.003). An increase in percentage of students receiving disability services remained significant and associated with an increase in rate of transfer (β= 0.00069, p=0.028). An increase in concentrated poverty at the school level remains associated with an increase in rate of transfer (β= 0.054, p=0.000). An increase in dropout (β=0.090, p=0.000) is associated with an increase in rate of transfer while an increase in enrollment by 100 students (β=-0.0021, p=0.001) is associated with a decreased rate of transfer.

Table 6. School demographic composition predicting transfer

		β	SE	P>t	[95% conf. interval]	
School Demographic Variables						
Race						
	Black	-.0012	.00040	.002**	-.0020	-.00049
	Latine	-.0010	.00035	.003**	-.0018	-.00039
Special Education Status						
	Students with IEP	.00069	.00031	.028*	.000076	.0013
Sex						
	Female	-.036	.028	.19	-.092	.019
Measures of Poverty and Social Status						
	SSCON	.054	.014	.000***	.026	.082
	SSOC	-.018	.015	.25	-.049	.012
Dropout						
	Dropout	.090	.018	.000***	.053	.128
Increase in Enrollment						
	Enrollment	-.0021	.00061	.001*	-.0033	-.00089
Percent Students Residing Attendance Boundary						
	Zone	-9.48	.00015	.95	-.00031	.00029

Note: p value is *>0.05 **>0.01 ***>0.001

The full results of student perception of instructional quality predicting rate of alternative high school transfer are available in Table 7. When included in a fixed effect regression with other measures of instructional quality, Math Instruction, English Instruction, and Course Clarity remain significant. An increase in students' perception of Math Instruction (β=0.0085, p=0.000) is associated with an increase in rate of transfer while an increase in students' perception of English Instruction (β=-0.0053, p=0.013) is associated with a decrease in rate of transfer. An increase in students' perception of Course Clarity is associated with a decrease in rate of transfer (β=-0.010, p=0.042).

Table 7. Student perception of instructional quality predicting transfer

		β	SE	P>t	[95% conf. interval]	
Measures of School-level Instructional Quality						
	Academic Press	.0095	.0051	.065	-.00061	.019
	Math Instruction	.0085	.0015	.000***	.0054	.011
	English Instruction	-.0053	.0021	.013*	-.0094	-.0011
	Science Instruction	-.0017	.0020	.39	-.0057	.0023
	Course Clarity	-.010	.0052	.042*	-.021	-.00042
	Classroom Rigor	.0010	.0030	.73	-.0050	.0071

Note: p value is *>0.05 **>0.01 ***>0.001

The full results of student perception of school climate predicting rate of transfer are available in Table 8. When included in a fixed effect regression with other measures of school climate, Student-Teacher Trust remains significant. An increase in students' perception of Student-Teacher Trust is associated with an increase in rate of transfer (β= 0.0093, p=0.002).

Table 8. Student perception of school climate predicting transfer

		β	SE	P>t	[95% conf. interval]	
Measures of School Climate						
	Student-Teacher Trust	.0093	.0029	.002**	.0035	.015
	School-wide Future Orientation	.0014	.0030	.62	-.0044	.0074

Note: p value is *>0.05 **>0.01 ***>0.001

Research Question 4 and 5

The full results of school demographic composition and student perception of school instructional quality predicting rate of alternative high school transfer are available in Table 9. When included in a fixed effect regression with other variables of school demographic composition and instructional quality, dropout, Math Instruction, and English Instruction remain significant. An increase in percent dropout is associated with an increase in rate of transfer (β=0.065, p=0.038). An increase in student perception of Math Instruction is associated with an increase in rate of transfer (β=0.0059, p=0.000) while an increase in student perception of English Instruction is associated with a decreased rate of transfer (β=-0.0057, p=0.006).

Table 9. Demographic composition and instructional quality predicting transfer

		β	SE	P>t	[95% conf. interval]	
School Demographic Variables Race						
	Black	-.00058	.00041	.16	-.0014	.00024
	Latine	-.00066	.00042	.11	-.0014	.00016
Special Education Status						
	Students with IEP	.00043	.00042	.30	-.00040	.0012
Sex						
	Female	-.036	.028	.20	-.094	.020
Measures of Poverty and Social Status						
	SSCON	.028	.014	.059	-.0010	.058
	SSOC	-.016	.017	.33	-.050	.017
Dropout						
	Dropout	.065	.031	.038*	.0036	.12
Increase in Enrollment						
	Enrollment	-.00060	.00062	.33	-.0018	.00062
Percent Students Residing Attendance Boundary						
	Zone	.000072	.00014	.62	-.00021	.00036
Measures of School-level Instructional Quality						
	Academic Press	.0080	.0047	.094	-.0013	.017
	Math Instruction	.0059	.0014	.000***	.0031	.0087
	English Instruction	-.0057	.002	.006**	-.0098	-.0016
	Science Instruction	-.0015	.002	.44	-.0056	.0025
	Course Clarity	-.0074	.0045	.10	-.016	.0015
	Classroom Rigor	.00032	.0029	.91	-.0056	.0062

Note: p value is *>0.05 **>0.01 ***>0.001

The full results of school demographic composition and student perception of school climate predicting rate of alternative high school transfer are available in Table 10. When included in a fixed effect regression with other variables of school demographic composition and school climate, Latine, SSCON, dropout, and enrollment remain significant. No measures of school climate remain significant. An increase in percent of Latine students is associated with a

decrease in rate of transfer (β=-0.00077, p=0.43). An increase in concentration of poverty (β=0.045, p=0.002) and dropout (β=0.091, p=0.000) are associated with an increase in rate of transfer. An increase in student enrollment by 100 is associated with a decrease in rate of transfer (β=-0.0018, p=0.005).

Table 10. School demographic composition and school climate predicting transfer

		β	SE	P>t	[95% conf. interval]	
School Demographic Variables						
Race						
	Black	-.00034	.00040	.39	-.0011	.00044
	Latine	-.00077	.00038	.043*	-.0015	-.000025
Special Education Status						
	Students with IEP	.00057	.00035	.11	-.00014	.0012
Sex						
	Female	-.046	.029	.11	-.10	.011
Measures of Poverty and Social Status						
	SSCON	.045	.014	.002**	.016	.073
	SSOC	-.026	.015	.083	-.05	.0035
Dropout						
	Dropout	.091	.022	.000***	.046	.13
Increase in Enrollment						
	Enrollment	-.0018	.00065	.005**	-.0031	-.00056
Percent Students Residing Attendance Boundary						
	Zone	.000049	.00015	.74	-.00024	.00034
Measures of School-level Climate						
	Student-Teacher Trust	.0017	.0026	.50	-.0034	.0069
	School-wide Future Orientation	.0022	.0025	.38	-.0028	.0073

Note: p value is *>0.05 **>0.01 ***>0.001

Discussion

This study sought to describe patterns of association between established predictors of school pushout and alternative high school transfer. My findings indicate that school-level practices of school pushout are predictive of alternative high school transfer. What follows is a

discussion of the association between dropout and transfer as well as the school characteristics that contribute to transfer.

Overall, the findings indicate that percentage dropout at the school-level is significantly associated with an increased rate of alternative high school transfer. While dropout and transfer had a relationship before the expansion of alternative high schools in CPS, mainstream high schools had higher rates of dropout and lower rates of transfer in 2008. In 2020 the relationship between dropout and transfer remained but more schools had lower rates of dropout and higher rates of transfer. This finding combined with the results of the bivariate and fixed effects regressions indicate a relationship between dropout and alternative high school transfer.

In fixed effect regressions predicting the impact of school racial composition on alternative high school transfer, an increase in the percentage of Black students was associated with a decrease in rate of transfer. However, these variables were not significant when included in a model of instructional quality but an increase in Latine students was significantly associated with a decrease in rate of transfer when included in a model of school climate. Together, these findings suggest that the racial composition of a school shapes to what extent Black and Latine students are protected from or targeted for alternative high school transfer as a form of differential selection and processing (Eitle and Eitle, 2004, Payne and Welch, 2010).

Bivariate and fixed effect regressions of instructional quality and school climate indicate that positive metrics are not universally associated with positive outcomes for Black and Latine students. In the bivariate regression an increase in student perception of math instruction, English instruction, and science instruction was associated with an increased rate of transfer. When placed in a fixed effect regression with school composition, math instruction and English instruction remained significant. An increase in student perception of math instruction was

associated with an increase in rate of transfer while an increase in student perception of English instruction is associated with a decreased rate of transfer. These associations signal the need for further research examining the relationship between instructional quality and alternative high school transfer. My measures of school-level student perception include the perception of all students, not just those who transfer. In future research it would be useful to examine the perception of students who transfer to alternative high schools. It is possible that student perception of instructional quality is distinct amongst those that transfer. While some students may experience specific instructional practices as rigorous instruction, others might be excluded by such practices. Such practices may include teachers putting students on the spot when asking questions, harsh grading, increased readiness to fail students, and less emphasis on building rapport with students (Cruz & Meyers, 2024).

In the bivariate model, measures of school climate were associated with an increase in transfer. However, when included in a fixed effect regression with variables of school racial composition, no measures of school climate remained significant while an increase in the percentage of Latine students remained associated with a decrease in transfer. These findings raise similar questions about the experience of school climate amongst students that transfer to alternative high schools and how those experiences might be distinct from the rest of the student body. This could indicate that the students who transfer to alternative high schools are specific student group who have unique experiences in the education system that are not largely unaccounted for. Insight into how this group of students perceives school climate could identify targeted avenues for mainstream school improve.

With any study, there are a few limitations that must be addressed. First, charter schools, private schools, and alternative high schools were excluded from the sample and descriptive

associations between school-level characteristics. Thus, transfer cannot be extended to these school types. Second, data from 2008-2020 was used to exclude the COVID-19 pandemic and a period of remote learning in CPS. Additionally, beginning in 2020 the district implemented a new alternative high school transfer policy meant to constrain school personnel discretion in transfer as well as centralize the transfer process. Given the decentralized norms of alternative high school transfer in CPS prior to the policy, the implementation of the policy could possibly alter the results of future studies attempting to investigate school-level predictors of alternative high school transfer. Considering the under-researched role of alternative high school transfer, future studies should investigate to what degree does the implementation of district policy meaningfully shift school-level practices of transfer and the population of the students transferring. Additionally, given the concerns of transparency, privatization, and segregation in the alternative high school ecosystem, serious interrogations of how alternative high school transfer is used by school personnel is warranted.

Conclusion

My results raise the alarm for alternative high school transfer as a potential form of school pushout. I hope that district policymakers will interpret the findings of this study as a call to reconsider the role of alternative high schools in their districts. Given the trends presented above as well as the stakes associated with these trends for historically marginalized students, I recommend a concerted effort to review existing alternative high school transfer policies, the demographic patterns of transfer, and the school practices that contribute to transfer. Black and Latine students deserve an approach to instruction and school climate that engages them as participants. This can only be achieved by amplifying the perspectives of students most likely to

transfer and critically interrogating any alternative high school stakeholders that are contracted to enter a district.

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“Talking Out of Both Sides:” The Interpretation and Enactment of a Racially-Conscious Alternative High School Transfer Policy

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Abstract: Race-evasive theory suggests that race-evasive ideology creates racially-neutral policies that reinforce racial inequities but has not explored the role of practitioner discretion in reshaping such policy. Conversely, street-level bureaucracy theory suggests that policy making is determined through practitioner discretion but has largely siloed racism as a preexisting condition of the institutions discretion occurs within. I leverage a unique case of racially-conscious policy making in a school district to explore the role of race in practitioner discretion. Through analysis of 31 narrative interviews with district administrators and school practitioners, I demonstrate how the interpretation and enactment of an alternative high school transfer policy was racialized. District administrators conceptualized alternative high school transfer as an issue of school exclusion that negatively impacted Black students and an unregulated carceral practice in schools that necessitated monitoring. In contrast, while school practitioners acknowledged that transfer disproportionately impacted Black students, their understanding of alternative high school transfer was informed by their need to respond to the systemic advantages and disadvantages students entered high school with as well as negotiate competing policies. This interpretation lead school practitioners to use their discretion to ignore the new transfer policy, rendering it meaningless. Four findings emerged: 1) district administrators and school personnel located fault for a racialized process outside themselves, 2) school personnel reconceptualized transfer trajectories in ways that were not aligned with the policy, 3) school personnel negotiated competing policy priorities, and 4) school culture naturalized racialized discretion in transfer cases. Ultimately, I argue that racially-conscious policy making remains important but that the impact of such policy is determined by practitioners within their organizations.

[4] This is my way acting of in solidarity with Palestinian people and putting into practice my social work values.

"Talking Out of Both Sides:" The Interpretation and Enactment of a Racially-Conscious Alternative High School Transfer Policy

Introduction

Over half a million students in the U.S. have been transferred from mainstream high schools into alternative high schools. Alternative high schools are separate educational settings designed for "at-risk" students defined as "students at risk of educational failure as indicated by poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, pregnancy, or similar factors associated with temporary or permanent withdrawal from school" (Carver et al., 2010, pg. 13). Scholars have argued that the "at-risk" student label is racialized and most often applied to Black students, students with disabilities, and/or students receiving free or reduced lunch (James, 2012). Since alternative high schools were designed for an "at-risk" student population, it is unsurprising that the vast majority of students enrolled in these settings identify as Black, are diagnosed with a disability, and are from lower socioeconomic status families (Lehr & Lange, 2003; Perzigian et al., 2017; Phillippi et al., 2021). Further, the number of districts with alternative high schools increased by 21% between 2000 and 2008, with the majority of that expansion concentrated in urban districts serving students of color (Carver et al., 2010). The fact that a third of these new programs are not able to enroll new students due to space and/or staffing limitations, combined with the racial patterns associated with alternative school openings and student enrollment, is evidence alternative high school transfer may be a mechanism of racial inequity in public education (Carver et al., 2010).

This suspicion is amplified by concerns of quality in the alternative high school ecosystem. There is no way to guarantee the quality of services and education provided to students nor is there conclusive evidence that students' educational and postsecondary outcomes

are improved by alternative high schools (Wilkerson et al., 2016). Scholars have argued that the expansion of alternative high schools is connected to the era of school accountability where schools receive rewards or punishments for academic and behavioral metrics (Ewing et al., 2023; Kostyo et al., 2018). Academic metrics such as graduation rates, attendance, and test scores have been a part of federal accountability policies since 2001 whereas behavioral metrics, including suspension rates, were newly added under the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015 (Kostyo et al., 2018). Scholars have speculated alternative high school transfer has become a "safety valve" in public education (Kelly, 1993; Selman, 2017; Cronin, 2019). Essentially, rather than suspend a student, transfer is a way for mainstream school practitioners to quietly exclude students deemed academic or behavioral problems from both the school environment and the school's accountability metrics.

This understanding of alternative high school transfer is largely based on analysis of policy documents and is missing empirical accounts of the transfer process (Carroll, 2007; Selman, 2017; Fedders, 2017; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2022). Although there is literature on the experiences of students who transferred into alternative high schools and the perspectives of alternative high school personnel on why students transfer (Drake, 2022; Ewing et al., 2023; Cruz & Meyers, 2024), we know little about the discretion of mainstream school practitioners in the transfer process. Without this understanding, we can do little to improve mainstream school practice and prevent the transfer of historically marginalized students into alternative settings.

This becomes more crucial as we have recently seen the emergence of new alternative high school transfer policies in urban districts across the country, including Denver Public Schools, Chicago Public Schools, D.C. Public Schools, San Francisco Public Schools, and Atlanta Public Schools. These policies are characterized by their attempts to limit mainstream

school discretion in the transfer process by 1) centralizing and standardizing the transfer process within districts, 2) designating “appropriate” reasons for transfer (e.g. the need for flexible schedules or smaller classroom sizes), and 3) excluding behavior as a reason to transfer a student. Knowing more about how discretion is used in the context of these policies will allow for a greater understanding of their potential and how they might be improved. To this aim, I facilitated 31 interviews across 17 district administrators and mainstream school practitioners in a district that enacted a new racially-conscious alternative high school transfer policy- a transfer policy designed to improve the conditions of and outcomes for racialized students (Gottlieb et al., 2021). Through analysis I answer the following question: *How do school practitioners interpret and enact the racially-conscious alternative high school transfer policy?*

My analysis picks up where the formal alternative high school transfer policy stops, in schools where the racially-conscious policy is interpreted and given meaning by mainstream school practitioners. Because of the racial-conscious framing of the transfer policy I explore possible racialized features of discretion as well as examine how organizational and institutional conditions might incite racialized discretion. I explore these and other influences on discretion by engaging novel qualitative methods rarely used in the street-level literature, including narrative approaches of longitudinal interviewing, co-construction of story with participants, and visual methods. These methods prioritize practitioner voice in articulating discretion and characterizing the pressures that shape their daily work. The use of creative methods to investigate underexplored elements of discretion has the potential to enrich our intellectual and practical understanding of how to tackle complex educational inequities and provides an avenue for practitioners to develop a sense of agency and participation in system-wide reforms.

Background: Alternative High School Transfer as a Policy Concern

Concerns of School Exclusion

The transfer of students from mainstream schools to alternative high schools evokes concerns of school exclusion and accountability. In 43 states, alternative schools are defined in policy by their target population: students who have disengaged from school due to poor grades, lack of attendance, behaviors labeled disruptive, and pregnancy (Porowski et al., 2014). As originally conceived in the 1970's, alternative high schools promised to improve school engagement and completion for students at risk of leaving school without a diploma by providing flexible schedules, culturally responsive curricular programs, and additional student support services (Porowski et al., 2014). However, in the 1980's, paralleling the rise of mass incarceration, alternative high schools became associated with the containment of "unruly youth" (Ewing et al., 2023). As a result, the now-mature system of alternative high schools is considered by some to be a carceral space with various material and symbolic ties to the criminal legal system including the management of alternative high schools by juvenile legal departments or referral pathways from juvenile detention centers into alternative high schools (Gardner et al., 2024; Welsh, 2022).

The parameters for alternative high school transfer defined in state policy (i.e. poor grades, poor attendance, behaviors deemed disruptive, and pregnancy) are associated with longstanding perceptions of youth academic or moral failures that need to be adjusted or contained (Meiners, 2007). Taken together, these factors suggest that within each district there is a population of students who are considered too difficult, too expensive, and too much of a liability to educate in mainstream settings (Ewing et al., 2023). In urban districts this student group intersects with preexisting racialized, ableist, and classist narratives about youth criminality (Selman, 2017; Annamma et al., 2019). As a result, it is unsurprising that students

transferred to alternative high schools within urban districts are overwhelmingly more likely to be Black, diagnosed with a disability, and/or qualify for free/reduced lunch than their peers remaining in mainstream settings (Lehr & Lange, 2003; Perzigian et al., 2017; Phillippi et al., 2021).

Concerns of Accountability and Quality

Currently, there is no standard of practice for alternative high schools, no systematic information about who attends such schools or why they were transferred out of the mainstream setting, and no way to review the quality of education and services provided at alternative high schools (Carver et al., 2010). The opacity of the alternative school ecosystem is facilitated by privatization. Alternative high schools are largely run by for-profit companies or large Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) and operate independently from district governance (Vogell & Fresques, 2017; Carver et al., 2010). Thus, the availability of information about alternative high schools contrasts with the legally mandated openness of mainstream school data where members of the public are able to assess basic information about enrollment numbers, demographics, and test scores.

To demonstrate, a 2007 evaluation from the state of California noted that 10-15% of the state’s high school students enrolled in alternative high schools each year (Hill, 2007). Despite the large portion of students attending alternative high schools, the report noted that “the state’s accountability system allow[ed] schools and districts to use referrals to alternative schools as a way to avoid responsibility for the progress of low-performing students” (pg. 1). Ultimately, the report found that students enrolled in alternative high schools fell through “data cracks” as they were not represented in the otherwise rigid district accountability tracking systems. The California report mirrored the findings of a 2009 American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) report.

The ACLU found the state of Mississippi spent over $100 million on alternative high schools (ALCU, 2009). Despite this significant public investment, basic information on the alternative schools were not publicly available. For example, questions such as how many students attended alternative schools statewide, what were the racial demographics of this student population, and how many students in alternative schools qualified for disability services were "nearly impossible" to answer.

Theoretical Framework: Street-Level Theory

Little attention has been paid to the role of alternative high school transfer in reproducing racial inequity in public education (Welsh, 2022). This is troubling as transfer to alternative high schools is a highly discretionary process that occurs under the radar. For example, suspension practices have received extensive scholarly attention and have been the focus of district-wide reform (Sullivan et al., 2014; Steinberg & Lacoe, 2018). Expulsion, while undoubtably harmful, is rare, impacting 0.2% of students, and is a legal process a school cannot undergo without the approval of a judge (Synder et al., 2019). Given the emphasis on practitioner discretion in the transfer process, I use street-level theory to inform my analysis.

Street-level theory has been widely used in social work scholarship to interpret how policy is reshaped through the bias and judgments of practitioners (Watkins-Hayes, 2009; Lipsky, 1980). More recent attention has been given to the salience of organizations in shaping practitioner discretion through constraints (heavy caseload, resource constraints, limited time etc.) and procedures that practitioners must make meaning of (Brodkin, 2012; Zacka, 2017). Despite the reality that many clients experience interactions with practitioners as racializing and the recent theorizing of organizations as racialized, the street-level literature has largely

conceptualized racism as a preexisting condition of the institutional environment discretion occurs within (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Ray, 2019).

The nearest engagement with how race shapes discretion and clients' experience is Watkin-Hayes's (2011) qualitative study of recipients and providers of public cash benefits and food stamps. Watkin-Hayes (2011) found that the role of race in discretion was mediated by organizational context and within group politics. Though the presence of Black and Latine caseworkers "symbolically convey[ed] a message of inclusion and openness," recipients did not believe that the racial identity of their caseworker defined their experience in welfare programs (pg. i245). Instead, the power caseworkers held over clients' lives was paramount- "Bureaucrats are bureaucrats, these clients reason, and they collectively exist on the opposite side of clients" (Watkins-Hayes, 2011, pg. i246). I extend conceptual understanding of race in the street-level bureaucracy literature by conceptualizing race as a phenomenon that shapes space and what bodies can do in space (Ahmed, 2007; Guz & Suslovic, 2023). Said more simply, I consider how discretion is a situated process that might take on a racial character not solely dependent on the racial identity of an individual practitioner.

The Case of Hightown Public Schools

I explore the interpretation and enactment of a district-wide policy reform in Hightown Public Schools, a large urban Midwest district. The alternative high school system in Hightown has expanded to serve 1 in 10 high school students across 30 alternative high schools. If it were regarded as its own district, the alternative high school system in Hightown would be considered the 25th largest district in the state. Over 80% of the district's alternative high schools are operated by for-profit companies or CMOs. The expansion of alternative high schools in Hightown began in the 2011- 2012 school year. In 2012 the district reported having 5,168

students enrolled in alternative high schools and by 2015 the number had increased to 15,059 (an over 100% increase in 3 years). Given what is already known about racial stratification in public education, it is unsurprising that Hightown Public Schools alternative high school students, compared to their high school aged peers not in alternative settings, are more likely to identify as Black (60% compared to 35%), more likely to qualify for free and reduced lunch (84% compared to 76%), more likely to have experienced housing instability (21% compared to 4%), and more likely to be diagnosed with a disability (21% compared to 16%).

My analysis stems from an over 2 yearlong research-practice partnership with Hightown Public Schools which began with the design and implementation of a new alternative high school transfer policy in the district. Through the partnership I came to understand the alternative high school transfer policy as an attempt at racially conscious policy making- policy that was explicitly designed to improve the conditions of and outcomes for racialized groups (Gottlieb et al., 2021). District administrators were concerned that the wide availability of privatized alternative high schools created perverse incentives for mainstream school personnel to remove students deemed academic and/or behavior problems. Further, given the known racialized ableist dynamics of school exclusion, district administrators were especially concerned that Black students were being targeted for transfer (Skiba et al., 2014). In response to these concerns the district created a policy that outlined "appropriate" reasons for transfer (e.g., academic recovery, the need for a smaller learning environment, or flexible schedules) and banned racialized "inappropriate" reasons for transfer (e.g., behavior and attendance) (Fedders, 2017).

The racially-conscious alternative high school transfer policy in Hightown is a unique case for two reasons. First, previous literature has characterized dominant actors (administrators) as lacking the motivation to create change while peripheral actors (practitioners) "may have the

incentive to create and champion new practices, but often lack the power to change institutions" (Garud et al., 2009, pg. 961). In my study, district administrators did not lack motivation and invested resources to design the district's first alternative high school transfer policy. Second, critical education scholars have critiqued a race evasive[5] approach to policy design and the perception of policy enactment as a racially-neutral process (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Ewing, 2018). In my analysis, district administrators did not use race evasive framing in the design of the policy and did not communicate about the policy using race neutral discourse. District administrators framed the problem of transfer as racialized and considered attendance and behavior to be racialized reasons to transfer a student. I use interviews with district administrators and school practitioners to answer the following research question: *How do school practitioners interpret and enact the racially-conscious alternative high school transfer policy?* My findings have implications for practice in mainstream schools and for future attempts at racially-conscious policy making.

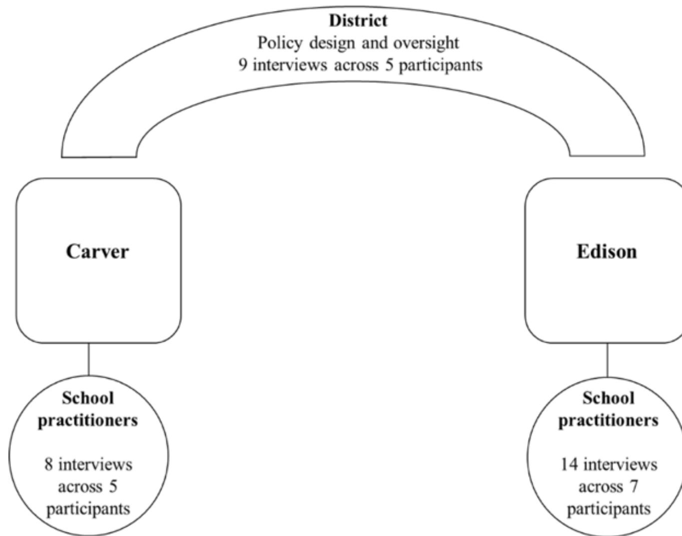
Method

Study Design and Site Selection

I merged the traditions of case study and narrative inquiry (Sonday et al, 2020). I engaged these qualitative traditions by first constructing a comparative dual embedded case study of two public high schools in Hightown Public Schools- Carver High School and Edison High School[6] (Yin, 2009) (see Figure 7). I selected Carver and Edison as theoretical anomalies that could extend existing conceptualizations of alternative high school transfer.

[5] I use the term "race-evasive" to avoid using ablest language while still preserving the importance of Bonilla-Silva's original theory
[6] The names of the district and schools have been changed

Figure 7: Comparative dual embedded case study



I began the case selection process using administrative data from Hightown Public Schools to examine the organizational characteristics of different schools (see Table 1). Based on administrative data, Carver and Edison are large public high schools with, compared to other student racial groups, disproportionately high numbers of Black students transferring to alternative high schools. Additionally, I sought historical context for understanding Carver and Edison by engaging primary and secondary sources (e.g. newspaper articles published over the last 50 years) about the schools and their respective neighborhoods. By engaging primary and secondary sources alongside administrative data I was able to conceptualize Carver and Edison as large, well resourced, desirable schools located in affluent neighborhoods. I also came to understand Carver and Edison as schools that functioned as neighborhood high schools *and* elite academic spaces. A portion of students in both schools attended because they lived within an attendance boundary and were zoned to Carver and Edison as their neighborhood school. However, another group of students tested and auditioned into Carver and Edison through specialized academic tracking and boutique extracurricular programs.

Against the backdrop of these similarities, Carver and Edison have very different student demographics. For the past 5 years, over 80% of the Carver student body has identified as Black, whereas at Edison, the student body was more evenly split between Black, Latine, and white students (see Table 11). These racial demographics serve as a proxy for the schools' racial histories and how each racial history shapes school culture (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008). In contrast to the mountain of literature on "failing" urban schools, we know less about the processes of marginalization and enactment of policy in elite school settings such as these two. Further, processes of marginalization in settings like Edison have been well documented, where marginalization occurs *between* student racial groups. Less is known about school settings like Carver, where processes of marginalization occur *within* a single racial group.

Table 11: Student demographics and transfer rates at Carver and Edison

	Carver	Edison
Student enrollment in 2020	Over 1,500	Over 2,000
Student racial demographics over 5-year period		
Black students	Over 85%	Over 20%
Latine students	Less than 5%	Over 30%
white students	Less than 5%	Over 20%
Average yearly number of alternative school transfers over 5-year period	Over 15	Over 30
Percentage of students who transfer to alternative schools over 5-year period identify as Black	Over 90%	Over 50%

Recruitment & Participants

I facilitated a total of 31 interviews across 17 participants (see Table 12). For the purposes of this study I distinguish district administrators, people responsible for policy design

and monitoring, from school practitioners, people who enact policy in schools and work directly with students. I started recruitment by purposefully selecting district administrators who could speak to the design and district wide monitoring of the transfer policy as well as the organizational contexts of Carver and Edison. I then recruited within Carver and Edison using a combination of purposeful and snowball sampling. While recruiting within Carver and Edison I prioritized school personnel who directly enacted the transfer policy or supervised the transfer process. Across the case, the majority of participants identified as Black and as women. The participants I interviewed within Carver and Edison occupied a variety of roles within the schools and 80% had worked at their school for 5 years or more.

Table 12: Participant information

	Numbers of participants and interviews	Participant racial and gender identities	Participants professional role
District administrators	5 participants 9 interviews	80% identified as Black 80% identified as women	5 administrators
Carver	5 participants 8 interviews	80% identified as Black 60% identified as women	2 administrators 2 teachers 1 counselor
Edison	7 participants 14 interviews	Over 70% identified as Black 43% identified as women	4 administrators 2 counselors 1 school social work

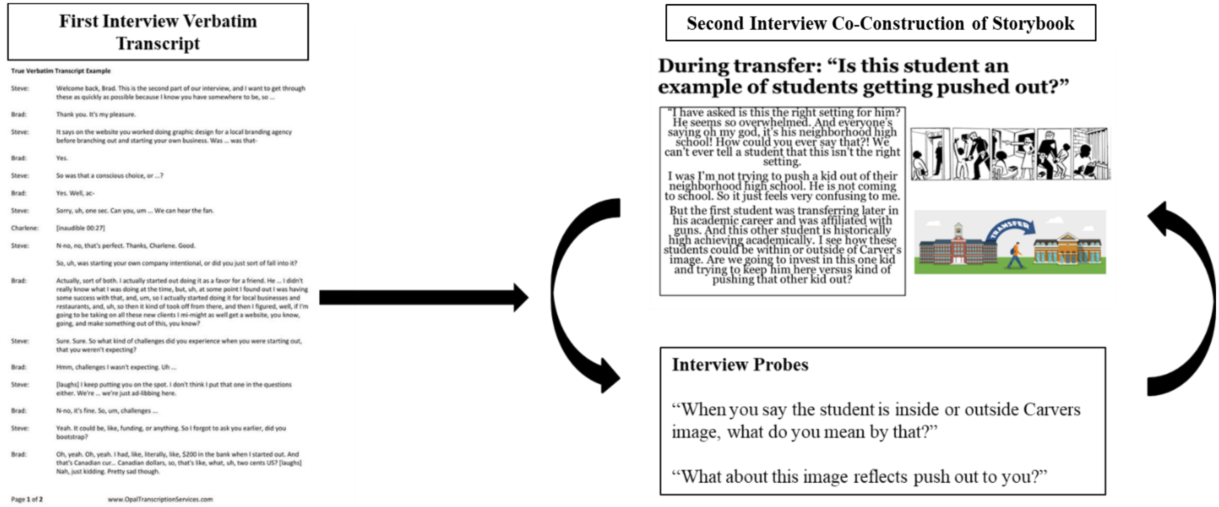
Qualitative Data Collection

Within the case study I engaged narrative inquiry to design my interview protocol (Sonday et al., 2020). I centered the interview protocol around three approaches of narrative inquiry: longitudinal interviewing, co-construction of story, and visual methods (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). Beginning with the use of longitudinal interviewing, I interviewed each

participant twice. The first in-depth interview was conducted in Fall 2022, lasted 80 minutes, and was structured chronologically to explore transfer practices before the policy, how practitioners learned about the policy, as well as their interpretation and enactment of the policy. The second interview was conducted in the Spring 2023 and lasted 90 minutes. During the second interview I engaged the narrative techniques of co-construction of story and visual methods in what I refer to as a "storybook" approach.

The storybooks took on one of two narrative formats that were designed to reflect the participants' role in the transfer process. The first narrative format focused on school personnel enacting the transfer policy- *before transfer, during transfer, after transfer*- and the second focused on school characteristics that impacted the transfer process- *school culture, school challenges, school priorities* (See Figure 8). I began the second interview by reviewing the verbatim transcription of the first interview with participants and then supported participants in selecting quotes from the transcript, titling chapters, and selecting images from the internet or photos taken on their personal devices. Most participants (10 practitioners) had a direct role in the transfer process and therefore used the first storybook format. I prioritized practitioners enacting the policy in recruitment and thus anticipated that more participants would use the first storybook format. Therefore, I intentionally designed the chronological structure of the first interview to mirror the chronological construction of the first storybook format as a way of facilitating the storybook construction process. The longitudinal interviewing allowed for me to account for shifts in participants' policy interpretation and enactment over time. The narrative techniques of co-construction and visual methods created opportunities for probes and served as a form of member checking.

Figure 8: Example of storybook method with practitioners



In creating the narrative protocols, I drew from my 6 years of social work practice experience using narrative art-based techniques in mainstream high schools and alternative high schools. While creating the protocols I recognized how my identities as a white, cis-woman with social work experience in schools might impact school personnel's' willingness to talk openly about emotionally intimate and politically salient topics. I used narrative approaches to be intentional about the rapport building process, the honor the need to prioritize practitioner voice, and to engage member checking through the data collection process.

Analysis

I transcribed verbatim the first and second interviews conducted with each school personnel. While transcribing the second interview I inserted images of the relevant storybook chapters created by the participants into the transcript. Therefore, I was able to reference the relevant storybook chapters being co-constructed in the transcript during analysis. After constructing a qualitative data set that was longitudinal and mixed media, I used the flexible coding method. The flexible coding method is an analytic approach that aligns with the values of applied interpretive analysis and the use of qualitative software to code visual data and

transcripts (Deterding & Waters, 2021). Codes were constructed inductively through an open coding of transcripts and deductively by referencing qualitative protocols. The use of inductive and deductive code construction allowed me to draw on the strengths of case study and narrative approaches. Inductive codes foregrounded the storied experiences of school practitioners, the storied organizations of Carver and Edison, and the participatory nature of the narrative protocol (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). In the tradition of case studies, the development of deductive codes involved reengaging multiple forms of evidence including administrative data used to select cases, policy documents from the district, memos about historical sources, and the memos I wrote after interviews (Yin, 2009).

I piloted the codebook alongside a research assistant before each interview was double coded in Dedoose. I utilized two rounds of analysis. In the first round of analysis, I used the narrative structure of the storybooks as a coding scheme to apply across the transcripts (i.e. "before transfer," "during transfer," "after transfer," "school culture," "school challenges," and "school priorities"). This allowed me to reorganize the data into easily manageable sections that were still anchored to participant narratives. In the second round of analysis, I applied the inductively and deductively created codes to trace the conditions that shaped school personnel's' interpretation of the policy and their use of discretion in the transfer process. I ended the analysis by comparing themes within and across Carver and Edison as well as investigated additional explanations to challenge my emerging analysis (Yin, 2009).

Findings

Through narrative interviews with district administrators and school practitioners I explored the interpretation and enactment of a racially-conscious, district-wide alternative high school transfer policy. District administrators conceptualized alternative high school transfer as

an issue of school exclusion that negatively impacted Black students and an unregulated carceral practice in schools that necessitated monitoring. In contrast, while school practitioners acknowledged that transfer disproportionately impacted Black students, their understanding of alternative high school transfer was informed by their need to respond to the systemic advantages and disadvantages students entered high school with as well as negotiate competing policies. This interpretation led school practitioners to use their discretion to ignore the new transfer policy, rendering it meaningless. Across the two schools four findings emerged: 1) district administrators and school personnel located fault outside themselves, 2) school personnel reconceptualized transfer trajectories in ways that were not aligned with the policy, 3) school personnel negotiated competing priorities, and 4) school culture naturalized racialized discretion in transfer cases.

Interpreting the Racially-Conscious Transfer Policy

Assuming Wrongdoing and Assigning Blame

In a policy and practice context where school exclusion is widely understood to be mechanism of racial inequity that disproportionately impacts Black students, administrators and practitioners avoided positioning themselves as enacting or corroborating anti-Black racism (Morris, 2016). District administrators assumed school practitioners were using alternative high school transfer as a way to remove problematized Black students. This conceptualization explicitly framed school practitioners as problematic actors who needed to be monitored. While presenting the new transfer policy to mainstream school practitioners, district administrators outlined *"best practices & key findings."* Administrators came to these practices and findings after an internal review of alternative high school transfer policies in other urban districts. During a PowerPoint presentation a district administrator read aloud from a slide, emphasizing

that other districts did *"not allow behavior to be used as a rationale for transfers to ensure neighborhood school accountability."*

The decision to read the slide aloud is representative of how district administrators conceptualized school exclusion and accountability as it related to alternative high school transfer- that neighborhood schools needed to be held accountable for *"adult behavior"* that *"pushes students out."*[7] This framing of alternative high school transfer was reflected in interviews with district administrators. Deborah[8], a district administrator who oversaw the policy at Edison, articulated her framing of alternative high school transfer and the necessity of the policy.

> "Sam: To what degree do you worry transfer is pushout?
> Deborah: Oh! 85% of the time. I've said that, you know, very, very candidly to [my colleagues at the district], like, 'Hey, this is something that I think is the norm. And I think that, because we haven't had a policy like this in place, schools were able to get away with it.' And so now that we have been uncovering these layers and schools are like 'Wait, what?' Now they don't know what they can and can't do, because they have practiced the wrong way for so long. Now, even in meetings, they're saying things that they shouldn't say."

Deborah assumed wrongdoing from school practitioners and saw the policy as a way to monitor their malpractice. Assigning fault to school practitioners led district administrators to become acutely focused on policy compliance, specifically preventing practitioners from side stepping or breaking the policy. During her interview Deborah pulled up a data sheet that district administrators used to track if the policy was being followed, *"We made a tab that says 'process not followed' because how is it that schools transfer the student and we didn't know…as you can see [trails finger along row in spreadsheet on the computer screen] we created this 'the process not followed' and yet the student transferred."*

[7] Quotes taken from presentation slide describing "key findings & best practices"
[8] Names of school personnel have been changed

School practitioners described district policies as red tape administrators created to have *"something to do."* While school practitioners' did view the transfer policy as an annoying bureaucratic step that offered no material support, their interpretation extended beyond feelings of annoyance to feeling antagonized. This feeling of antagonism stemmed from their perception that district administrators created the policy because they assumed wrongdoing- *"they assume we are pushing kids out."* In her first interview Sara, a counselor at Edison, reflected on her experience of the meeting Deborah mentioned above, *"This new process I guess [the district] wanted a little bit more oversight, created some more steps that we have to take. And when they came out to meet with us, I pushed back because I honestly felt very offended by the whole policy."* Sara was *"offended"* by district administrators' assumption of wrongdoing and self-anointed position as just actors intervening on racist school practice.

During her second interview Sara selected Figure 9, a white woman in a formal suit shaking her finger, to personify *"downtown"* district administrators who assumed transfer was a form of school exclusion and began monitoring school practitioners in an attempt to control their practice. Sara and Deborah are both Black women. Instead of representing an individual's racial identity, Sara's image selection reflects how a process, such as punitive policy monitoring, can take on a racialized-gendered character. This narrative construction aligns with scholarship arguing that punitive practices in education have historically been enacted by white women and thus, have taken on a persona of white femininity than extends beyond individual identities (Guz & Suslovic, 2023; Meiners, 2007). Though such work has focused on practitioners surveilling students, Sara's narrative suggests that the punitive monitoring of practitioners takes on a similar racialized-gendered tone.

Figure 9: District administrators assuming wrongdoing

Though not all practitioners personified district administrators as white women, they evoked language associated with white femininity as a “benevolent” form of social control when describing their interpretation of the transfer policy. For example, practitioners’ believed district administrators assumed a “helper” position to justify the district’s expansion of alternative high schools and the punitive monitoring of practitioners’ transfer practices (Guz & Suslovic, 2023; Meiners, 2007). As an Edison social worker stated, *“If schools are being judged by their graduation rates, and all these metrics that they’re being judged by, and then you have all these alternative schools that are not as academically challenging. It just seems the goals are not aligned. It’s like, you're providing us with these outs, and yet punishing us if we use them too much, or recklessly or whatever, in their minds.”*

Jack, a teacher at Carver, explicitly blamed district administrators for creating the very dynamic that was now being monitored:

> “Jack: And it’s kind of almost like the whole charter school movement, like you keep adding those and then saying, ‘Oh, it’s so unfortunate that the neighborhood school has, only 60 kids in their graduating class.’ You’ve given all these other avenues. So how can you be mad at what happens here?
> Sam: Ah it’s like, [the district] created this situation.

> Jack: Yeah! Which way do they want it? Do they want students to be successful and stay here? Okay, then help us! Or do you want to continue to add opportunities for them to go to other places? And then get mad when they're still not finishing from there!?"

School practitioners blamed district administrators for constructing a school system with struggling neighborhood schools and 30 alternative high schools that were widely believed to not be as academically challenging and required fewer credits to graduate. This interpretation led school practitioners to devalue the goal of the policy, cast administrators as insincere actors, and conclude that there was nothing wrong with their transfer practices. As Kari, the principal at Carver, exclaimed, *"I don't know what the policy is. I don't even care what it is, because you know, this is something [the district] makes. I don't care about that. What matters to me is, is Johnny passing his classes? Johnny's not passing his class, because the more he sits here and fails, that doesn't do anything for him. It actually hurts him to keep him here failing. So, I don't care anything about this new policy and all that stuff. This is good 'ole fashion education. Like that's just what it is. If Johnny can't finish here [he needs to transfer]."*

In their narratives, district administrators and school practitioners agreed that alternative high school transfer *"was not a good story"* because it signaled a student was not successful in their mainstream school. In acknowledging that transfer was not an ideal outcome for students and was an outcome disproportionately experienced by Black students, administrators and practitioners placed fault outside themselves. District administrators assumed school personnel were *"doing it wrong,"* engaging in racist malpractice that removed Black students from mainstream schools. School practitioners used racialized-gendered language to characterize district administrators' as leveraging a "helper" identity to justify constructing *"a broken system."* In doing so, district administrators and school practitioners distinguished themselves as

separate from one another and constructed rigid narratives about who was perpetrating anti-Black racism.

Reconceptualizing Transfer Trajectories

In discussing the multiple issues that affect alternative school transfer, school practitioners constructed a narrative of where and when the problems began. Their framing differed from the conceptualization of transfer reflected in the policy, which focused on students in high school and monitoring practitioner discretion. Carver and Edison were neighborhood high schools with a variety of academic tracking and extracurricular programs. There was a group of students in both schools who were zoned to Carver and Edison as their neighborhood school and a group of students that tested or auditioned in through specialized programs. Practitioners described students who entered the schools through specialized programs as *"being ready for high school."* In contrast, students who entered Carver and Edison as neighborhood students and attended feeder elementary schools were described as generally *"unprepared"* for high school and *"grossly unprepared"* for Carver and Edison. The inequities in the district that shaped how students arrived to high school was consistently present in school practitioners' narratives as the primary reason students transferred. In his first interview Jason, a Dean at Edison, told a story of alternative school transfer and began the story in elementary school:

> "In elementary school you're going to pass students to the next grade, 'Not my problem is gonna be next teacher problem.' And then students get to high school. And they read on a third grade level, they can't compete here, it's going by so fast. They don't want to be embarrassed, they don't know how to handle their situation. So either I'm not gonna come to school or when I come to school, I'm gonna act out. Now I've timed out. I'm 16 years old, I got three credits. I'm not gonna graduate with my peers. I'm gonna go to an alternative school."

During the second interview Jason selected the quote above for his storybook and reinforced his initial decision to begin the story of transfer in elementary school, *"Even though*

[a student] can't read at a certain level, or [isn't'] testing at a certain level, they still put these kids in these classes where they're not functioning. And then when they get to high school and you see it. The kids don't wanna be in the class or they're causing a distraction because they aren't reading at level or they're not able to comprehend or understand the school work. So, they'll, you know, walk the halls or do anything but wanna be inside that class, or causing a disruption while they inside the class." To go along with the quote Jason selected Figure 10, an image from the music video for Pink Floyd's song "Brick in the Wall." In the image students are dehumanized by wearing masks that obscure their faces and are moving along a conveyor belt where they eventually fall off. Rather than an image depicting students *"falling through,"* Jason sought out an image where students were being *"pushed through"* and where that *"pushing"* created repeated outcomes in the school system.

Figure 10: Students moving through the school district

School practitioners at Carver and Edison had different ways of articulating what Jason described- long-standing inequities in the district created *"unprepared"* students and those unprepared students inevitably transferred to alternative high schools. Across Carver and Edison school personnel identified the students who arrived to high school *"failed"* by the system as *"mostly Black students," "students who don't know where the next meal is coming from,"* and

"students with IEPs[9]." School practitioners expressed exasperation at bearing witness to the predictable advantages and disadvantages students carried with them *"year after year."* Part of this exasperation was rooted in their inability to address or resolve these systemic inequities and their perception of alternative school transfer as one of the only tools they wielded in response.

Practitioners stated that district administrators misunderstood when and where the problem began. From their perception, the policy individualized a systemic issue and intervened too late in students' trajectories. Reese, an assistant principal at Edison, had become committed to having *"as few transfers as possible and as few Black transfers as possible"* but ultimately interpreted the new policy as *"not focusing on what's important:"*

> "Some students still didn't understand what a credit means when they enter high school. We're still dealing with COVID for the underclassmen and the experience of getting passed along in elementary school. High school essentially is the same thing and they'll advance grades but when it comes to graduation time, if you don't have 24 credits, we don't care if we call you a senior, you're not graduating. So we need to make it clear to those students much earlier, you are a junior with six credits… you're not graduating. And we are going to transfer you quickly because you won't be able to amass enough credits to graduate from any Hightown [mainstream] high school. We have juniors with single digit credits. We're just kind of waiting to see what this semester looks like but… they'll be gone"

When Reese stated that juniors with single credits will eventually transfer, she was not merely making a moral evaluation of the students or assessing their academic worth. Rather she outlined a *"losing situation"* and described alternative school transfer as a way to respond to that situation. School practitioners bore witness to systemic inequities and, without the power to change the system, viewed alternative school transfer as one of the only ways to respond. Conceptualizing the transfer trajectory as one that begins in elementary school does not negate the importance of how school personnel wield discretion in students' cases during high school.

[9] An IEP is an Individualized Education Plan and reflects being diagnosed with a disability and receiving disability services in schools

Rather, it explains why school practitioners described their hands being tied. From their perspective, Black, low income, and/or disabled students consistently arrived to high school unprepared and the inequities in the district that facilitated preparedness or unpreparedness caused alternative high school transfer. Given the policy's explicit focus on monitoring practitioner discretion in mainstream high schools, personnel interpreted the policy as misaligned with the root cause of alternative school transfer.

Enacting the Racially-Conscious Transfer Policy

Navigating Competing Priorities

School practitioners weighed the alternative high school transfer policy against the district's preexisting accountability policies and expectations. Similar to many districts, Hightown Public Schools used an evaluation system that publicly ranked and graded schools based on graduation, attendance, and standardized test scores. In his first interview, Grant, a Dean at Carver, described how this preexisting policy context shaped his use of discretion in alternative school transfer, *"Carver really doesn't want to be perceived as a school that pushes students out [to alternative schools]. We would like to be known as a neighborhood school that accepts everyone. But there is this mentality of 'don't look behind the curtain' because you'll see how we get our attendance stats. And I do think that a lot of it comes back to the school ranking system."*

When constructing his storybook during the second interview, Grant selected Figure 11 to accompany the quote above. Referencing a scene from the 1939 U.S. film the "Wizard of Oz," the text shouting "PAY NO ATTENTION TO THE MAN BEHIND THE CURTAIN" ironically suggests that the audience should ignore the man operating machinery behind an emerald curtain. To Grant, this image and quote reflected how he and his colleagues at Carver used alternative

school transfer to respond to the district's ranking system. From their perspective, students who would likely transfer out were the same students who could negatively affect Carver's attendance and graduation metrics.

Figure 11: Use of discretion to address competing priorities

When reflecting on his quote and image selection Grant highlighted the implicit secrecy of discretion happening "behind a curtain." Grant went onto note that the new transfer policy did not drastically change how school personnel at Carver mobilized transfer, it just impacted how *"open"* they were with their discretion, *"I think that some of the issues that I've run into when I've been trying to navigate [alternative school transfer] is just accidentally saying the quiet part out loud that someone didn't want said. I'll just be like, 'So, we're doing X, Y, Z.' And they're like, 'We're not doing X, Y, Z.' But they can't explain to me how this isn't X, Y, Z. You just don't wanna put the name on what you're doing."*

In their narratives school personnel at Carver described maintaining the practice of hosting alternative school fairs and inviting alternative high school recruiters to meet with specific groups of students with the explicit aim of encouraging those students to transfer. In an interview, a district administrator who monitored the transfer policy, read aloud to me an email she received from an alternative high school recruiter who assumed she was school personnel at Carver:

> “Just a reminder that if you have students who fall short and need to make up credits, we are here to help. We offer smaller class sizes and personalized services that can assist students to whom the smaller school setting or flexible schedule may be an important aspect of helping them graduate. Also, I have been able to assist schools in reducing their drop out list by reaching out to their students and getting them back on track. So, if you have not been able to reach some of your students, I may be able to assist and help your school’s rank. You can either email the information to me or contact me at the number below.”

The recruiter’s email began with reasons for transfer that align with the Hightown Public School policy- *“smaller classroom settings and flexible schedule”*- before quickly moving to reasons that are decoupled from the policy- *“help [your school’s] rank”* (Ray, 2019). While Carver may receive a poor accountability ranking for low attendance rates and high dropout rates, alternative high schools in Hightown receive funding for each student enrolled. In this policy context, the movement of a student from Carver to an alternative high school benefitted both organizations.

School practitioners at Edison similarly described weighing the new transfer policy against the district’s preexisting accountability policies and, much like practitioners at Carver, Edison school personnel described the new policy as not shifting how they mobilized transfer. At Edison, protection to self and individual reputation was more central to how practitioners wielded discretion. Sara, the counselor at Edison who selected the image of the white woman to personify the district’s monitoring, described not being concerned with Edison’s ranking but rather her own professional reputation. In her first interview Sara articulated using discretion to avoid potential accusations of school exclusion:

> “We started getting pushback from the district, ‘No, you got to fill out some checklists and a form to get [transfer approval].’ And we were like, ‘Whoa, what?!’ at least I was. In the past, and I’ll be honest with you, I’m operating [how I was] because we’re not really following what [the district] wants us to do. I think there was always the option to do something on our end. If the family decides to go to the alternative high school then it can kind of happen in reverse. So since we knew that that was always still an option, that just is the one that makes more sense. So that's how it’s getting done with us right now.”

When families initiated transfer, the transfer was not directly traceable to a specific school-level practice or individual practitioner discretion. In her second interview, Sara doubled down on the discretionary practice of sidestepping the policy by counseling families to alternative high schools, *"I don't ever feel like [families'] rights are being, you know, violated. I certainly am never going to go on record as telling a family that they can't be here. I'm just gonna give them all the reasons why that doesn't make sense."* School practitioners at Carver and Edison used discretion to avoid the transfer policy by rendering it meaningless and continued to mobilize transfer as a way of responding to competing priorities.

School Culture Naturalized Racialized Discretion

The school cultures of Carver and Edison naturalized discretionary practices in alternative school transfer. Despite the policy's attempt to constrain discretion, practitioner discretion was still emphasized at particular points in the transfer process, specifically determining *who* should transfer and *when* a student should transfer. Practitioners at Carver consistently described the school as the *"highest performing majority Black neighborhood school in the country"* and *"an HBCU high school."* Christine, a counselor, selected Figure 12 to represent Carver's reputation as *"the majority Black school [the district] that is doing very well."* In the image, Black college students walk toward the camera adorned in graduation robes and a well-maintained, collegiate building serves as the students' backdrop. While this image reflected Christine's perception of Carver as an elite academic setting for Black students, it also reflected the school culture actively constructed at Carver. When explaining Carver's culture and what it meant for students, Olivia, a special education teacher, animated Carver speaking directly to students, *"You're going to college and we're going to help you get to college and we're going*

to help you get a scholarship to go to college. We're going to help you access the things that are largely denied to Black students."

Figure 12: Carver's culture

In her first interview Olivia described how Carver's school culture shaped discretion in the alternative school transfer process. She compared two cases where students were experiencing mental health challenges that prevented them from attending school regularly and impacted their grades. Despite the similarities in the students' cases, Olivia described differential outcomes:

> "One student we transferred had just transferred was affiliated with guns, from a different high school that we turn our noses at, and was struggling. The other student was historically high achieving academically and wanted to be a writer. I see how these students could be within or outside the Carver image. Are we going to invest in this one kid and try to keep him here versus pushing the other kid out?"

When constructing her storybook in the second interview Olivia reflected on the quote above, *"I don't know how often any of that is being thought about in a big picture way at all. It's not 'Oh that student's not meeting the Carver image in whatever way, so we're gonna do what we can to not have them here next year.' It's more like 'Oh [those students] aren't a fit so they naturally choose to leave Carver.'"* Olivia's quote illustrates how Carver's culture of *"high achievement"* for Black students naturalized organizationally constructed definitions of *"fit,"* which implicitly structured differential discretion in otherwise similar cases.

School personnel at Edison described the school as an *"ivy league high school"* and *"like a conservatory."* Michael, a Dean, selected Figure 13 to represent the general public's and district administrators' perception of Edison. While constructing his storybook Michael reflected on how photos taken at particular angles, such as Figure 5 made Edison look like *"a college,"* whereas other photos, focused on hallway murals or student lockers, made Edison look like a *"neighborhood high school."* For Michael, Edison was a combination of *"both spaces"* and used the phrase *"the crown jewel of neighborhood schools"* to describe Edison as an elite academic setting that also served neighborhood students.

Figure 13: Edison's culture[10]

In his first interview Chris, a social worker at Edison, described a pervasive organizational narrative about who transferred to alternative schools: "*The African American student population, it's somewhere between 20% to 22%. So of that 22%, honestly, I'd say 15% to 18% are from that [subsidized housing complex]. They are all in co-taught classes. And they don't do well here. A lot of them don't finish from here. And they are probably our greatest population that is transferred to alternative schools. I can see it when they come in the door, I can almost count on it, who's gonna make it through and who probably is not. That [feeder*

[10] School personnel used actual images of the schools taken on their personal devices or from the internet. Figure 13 is an image of Carver from the internet that Michael selected. To protect the confidentiality of the school community, I have blurred the image.

elementary school] really tries to discourage them from coming here because they know those students don't do well. But that doesn't happen because we're their neighborhood school"

During the second interview, Chris selected the above quote for his storybook and debated whether or not to include an image of the subsidized housing complex alongside it. After placing a photo of the housing complex in the storybook Chris looked at the chapter and reflected:

> "I mean, that's definitely how I feel. I would say that others may agree with it. They may not say it in that way but I think we all would agree with that. I think it's accurate. It's reflective of the team. A lot of the [students who transfer], their addresses are from there. On the other hand, I feel like…oh, I'm kind of, I don't know, stereotyping families from that community. And I don't want to do that. Do you know what I'm saying?"

Chris eventually removed the photo of the housing complex and instead selected an image of the school's hallway. However, after receiving a copy of his storybook at the end of the narrative process, he sent a follow up email continuing to reflect on the organizational narrative about Black students: *"I think I initially said 15-18% [of the Black students] fail to make it through but I think that's probably too high. The reality is that not ALL of the African American students are low performing or failing and there are a number who DO finish from Edison. So in retrospect, I think a more accurate estimate of transfer might be closer to 10-12%."*

Chris's back and forth about the percentage of Black students at Edison, the academic abilities of Black students, if Black students are neighborhood students, and how many Black students transfer to alternative schools demonstrates how school culture orients practitioners to particular, and in this case, racialized, classed, and ableist ways of thinking about students. During his second interview Chris described how this orientation shaped his use of discretion in two recent cases where Black students transferred to alternative schools during their senior year:

> "Chris: Well, here's the thing. When I look at one of the two students that just transferred out, probably could have worked out a plan, she wouldn't have graduated on time, she

> may have done four and a half years, or in some cases, she may have done a full fifth year. So I'm not going to say that, mathematically, they would never graduate, they will not graduate on time.
> Sam: So it's possible that one of those students could have stayed here?
> Chris: Oh yeah!"

Chris described the cases as distinct, one student was *"severely behind"* on credits and the other student was several credits away from graduating. Chris used discretion to determine that both students, despite their different academic standing, needed to transfer to alternative schools. The pervasive organizational narrative about Black students at Edison structured Chris's use of discretion to produce the same outcome in otherwise different cases.

In their storybook construction participants used racialized, and often, ableist-classist language to describe potential transfer students. As previous findings demonstrate, school practitioners were acutely aware of punitive accountability monitoring. Therefore, cultivating an *"elite"* school culture may have been protective in an institutional environment of high stakes accountability and, from the perspective of practitioners, may have required the transfer of problematized students to ensure that this protective school identity would not come under threat. The formation of exclusionary school cultures in response to a punitive institutional environment explains why practitioners with good intentions act in ways that reproduce racial inequities.

Discussion

Bonilla-Silva's (2006) theory of race-evasiveness argues that race-evasive ideology limits our understanding of the structural nature of social problems and makes it difficult to envision the kinds of policies needed to address them. To counter the influence of race-evasive ideology some have argued for a racially-conscious approach to policy making- that policy administrators should recognize the role of racism in creating inequities and policy should be designed to improve conditions for racialized groups. My analysis adds nuance to this argument in two ways.

First, demonstrating how the bureaucratic positioning of district administrators and school practitioners created distinct interpretations of alternative high school transfer as a racial problem and, second, despite the racially-conscious policy, practitioners continued to mobilize transfer to respond to competing policies that posed a threat to their school or to themselves as professionals.

In recognizing alternative high school transfer as a racialized outcome, district administrators and school practitioners constructed narratives where they were not implicated in a racial problem. District administrators' race-conscious framing of alternative high school transfer led to the blaming of individual practitioners and reinforced institutional norms of high-stakes accountability in education (Ewing et al., 2023). In contrast, school practitioners entirely situated the problem with the education system and rationalized their racialized discretionary patterns of transfer. In my study this strategic narrative construction was not driven by individuals' racial identity, but rather was shaped by participants' position in the system (Watkins-Hayes, 2011).

Each narrative contained a remnant of truth- practitioners used alternative high school transfer to remove problematized Black students from mainstream schools and longstanding systemic inequities created the conditions for transfer. Previous literature has painted bureaucracies as entities that translate state racial projects through organizational characteristics that structure practitioner discretion (Gordon, 2024). My analysis extends this by demonstrating how bureaucracies have complex and often conflicting policy agendas, exemplified in the expansion of alternative high schools and monitoring of alternative high school transfer in Hightown Public Schools. Practitioners in schools had to make meaning of and negotiate these competing priorities. In negotiating competing policies practitioners created truncated narratives

that underplayed the impact of their discretion in reproducing alternative high school transfer as a racial problem and rationalized using transfer to respond to district policies that posed a threat to their school or to themselves. Taken together, the interpretation and enactment of the transfer policy, emphasizes how discretion in the transfer process was racialized. Rather than racism being part of the pre-existing institutional context discretion is situated in, my analysis demonstrates how policy interpretation and enactment is a reproductive, racialized process shaped by the competing priorities of bureaucracy.

The enactment of a racially-conscious policy provides a unique opportunity to examine the role of race in street-level theory. This is especially salient for social workers who bear witness to racial inequities, interpret racial matters, and enact policy in their daily work. While administrators in public systems design racially-conscious mission statements, policies, and attempt to facilitate anti-racist practice, it is imperative to remember that those efforts are interpreted and given meaning at the street-level by practitioners. The degree to which practitioners evaluate racially-conscious policy as performative or significant as well as how they assess new expectations against existing institutional norms will constrain or expand the equity impact of change efforts.

My analysis has limitations. I did not set out to measure the outcomes of micro interactions nor evaluate the transfer policy. Therefore, I cannot make conclusive claims about the effectiveness or impact of the policy. Further, I did not select schools based on average or low transfer rates. Case selection was purposefully done to extend existing knowledge and was in alignment with the epistemological norms of critical interpretive qualitative research which privilege context-bound analysis over claims of wide generalizability in school practice (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003). Lastly, I leveraged narrative construction to support

practitioners in describing their discretionary practices. This included probing for specific case examples and providing practitioners an opportunity to reflect on their practice across longitudinal interviews. While this provided rich accounts of discretion in the transfer process, my study does not include firsthand observations of discretion.

Implications for Racially-Conscious Policy Making

Future attempts at racially-conscious policy should, first, consider how the new policy interacts with the preexisting policy environment, second, consider the role of narrative in creating a shared view of racism as the problem, and, third, grapple with the paradox of agency-structure. District administrators designed a district-wide policy to prevent school exclusion without attention to the institutional environment schools exist within, how that environment shaped schools' internal processes, and thus impacted how practitioners mobilized alternative high school transfer. As a result, the policy seemingly failed to address what seemed to shape alternative high school transfer. Second, the narrative misalignment between district administrators and school personnel contributed to practitioners' perception of the policy and entrenchment of racialized transfer practices. The use of narrative construction to create a shared understanding of racism as a problem and/or engage contestation may facilitate organized efforts to counter patterns of anti-Blackness in education.

Lastly, the transfer policy was facilitated through a top-down process that distanced district administrators from anti-Black racism, assumed wrongdoing by high school practitioners, and focused on monitoring practitioner's' decisions. The regulatory design of the transfer policy was intended to change student outcomes by constraining discretion but instead had the effect of entrenching racialized patterns of discretion. Rather than top-down approach to reform, attention to when and how practitioners "envision new practices and subsequently get others to adopt

them," could identify otherwise unknown, possibly more relevant opportunities for racially-conscious policy making (Hou, 2021, pg. 5). Going a step further, racially-conscious policy making might involve facilitating and prioritizing practitioners' imagination and habits as a way of changing racialized processes.

Implications for Social Work Practice

My narrative methodological process has implications for school social work practice. At the end of the narrative research process I asked all practitioners, "What was this like for you?" Practitioners universally responded that the research process gave them a rare opportunity to think reflexively about their practice, some noting that it had been *"years"* since they received formal supervision or had someone meaningfully asked them about their work. Narrative work may be an avenue to support practitioners in making better use of their discretion to counter, rather than reproduce, racial inequity.

For social workers interested in facilitating a narrative reflexive process in individual or group settings, I recommend adapting the narrative format of the research protocols by 1) focusing on a process connected to racial inequities, (e.g. construction of IEPs) and 2) structuring the narrative temporally. For example, a reflective narrative activity around IEP construction in a school could be structured as: "before IEP construction," "during IEP construction," and "after IEP construction." During the narrative process probes should be used to support practitioners make meaning of the systemic inequities that constrain their practice as well as identify opportunities for agency. In addition to facilitating micro-level changes, this narrative process could be utilized organizationally. One of the emergent findings in my study was that school culture oriented practitioners' perception of students and thus, structured their discretion. Chris's narrative process saliently demonstrates how entrenched that orientation can be. School social

workers are often on interprofessional teams focused on establishing a three-tiered system of support- Tier 3 focused on individual services for acute student needs, Tier 2 focused on group services, and Tier 1 focused on school climate and culture (Franklin, 2024). School social workers are thus uniquely positioned to engage narrative as a tool to create stability or facilitate equitable change across these tiers (Vaara & Sonenshien, 2016). Like the use of logic-models to facilitate programmatic change, my narrative protocol could also be adapted as an organizational practice targeting mezzo-level change (Epperson et al., 2023).

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“Your Heart is Breaking for Them:” Alternative High School Transfer as a Familial Experience of Criminalization and School Pushout

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Abstract: Symbolic criminalization describes how students’ manner, style, and needs are labeled deviant and punished but has not encompassed the ways families may be impacted by processes of criminalization in school. Conversely, critical scholarship on Black caregiver involvement indicates family members are placed in a subordinate position by schools but has largely not considered how the marginalization of caregivers facilitates school pushout. I leverage the underexamined process of alternative high school transfer to weave together the literatures on symbolic criminalization and Black caregiver involvement. Through narrative thematic analysis of 14 narrative interviews with Black caregivers, three narrative arcs of alternative high school transfer arose: “being targeted,” “pushed up against a wall,” and “letting the process play out.” While forming these arcs I identified two findings. First, Black families experienced alternative high school transfer as a form of school pushout facilitated by symbolic criminalization. Second, symbolic criminalization targets family systems, making school pushout a familial experience rather than an individual student experience. After discussing my findings, I end with implications for district policy and school-based practice.

[11] This is my way of acting in solidarity with Palestinian people and putting into practice my social work values.

“Your Heart is Breaking for Them:” Alternative High School Transfer as a Familial Experience of Criminalization and School Pushout

Introduction

Each year over half a million students in the United States transfer out of mainstream schools into a separate, largely invisible system of alternative high schools (Carver et al., 2010; Vogell & Fresques, 2017). For the purpose of this study, alternative high schools are defined as separate educational settings for students who have disengaged from school due to poor grades, lack of attendance, behaviors labeled disruptive, pregnancy, and the need to work or provide family care (Porowski et al., 2014; Ewing et al., 2023). Despite enrolling students who have experienced acute barriers in and out of school, there is no standard for the quality of education or support services provided in alternative settings and no systematic way to review why students transferred into alternative schools (Carver et al., 2010; Vogell & Fresques, 2017; Fedders, 2017).

Alternative high schools are expanding across the US, with the majority operated by a handful of for-profit companies or corporate like Charter Management Organizations (Vogell & Fresques, 2017). Between 2000-2008, the alternative high school student population increased by 21%, and 94% of urban districts now have an alternative high school. Compounding concerns of quality and privatization, alternative high schools are highly segregated spaces. The alternative high school student population is overwhelmingly more likely to be Black, diagnosed with a disability, and/or qualify for free/reduced lunch than the overall population of the district in which such schools are located (Lehr & Lange, 2003; Perzigian et al., 2017; Phillippi et al., 2021). Taken together, historically marginalized students are disproportionately transferring into

an opaque alternative high school system without conclusive evidence that their educational or postsecondary outcomes are improved (Catterall & Stern, 1986; Wilkerson et al., 2016).

Despite decades of research documenting, explaining, and attempting to address ongoing racial disparities in education, the role of alternative high schools in reproducing racial inequity is largely absent from the academic literature (Selman, 2017; Vogell & Fresques, 2017). The existing empirical research on alternative high schools has focused primarily on evaluating the effectiveness of single alternative school models or describing the experiences of students enrolled in alternative high schools without attention to issues of school quality, privatization, or racial segregation. As a result, the widely-accepted understanding of alternative high schools is that they are neutral, standalone organizations operating within the boundaries of policy. The students enrolled are blamed for not succeeding in mainstream schools and often characterized through a deficit lens as behaviorally challenged, disinterested in academics, and navigating the education system without family support (Escobar-Chaves, 2002).

The latter characterization of alternative high school students as navigating public education alone insidiously targets families with acute implications for Black families. The ontological assumption that alternative high school students, the majority of whom are Black, navigate the education system alone depends on anti-Black master narratives that paint Black caregivers as absent and/or not having the cultural capital to adequately support their children (Yosso, 2005; Cooper 2009; Puchner & Markowitz, 2015). This perception makes already historically marginalized students more vulnerable to potential tactics of criminalization and school pushout in the alternative high school transfer process because school personnel might assume these students do not have a caregiver advocating for them or that their caregiver does not have sufficient knowledge of the education system to be effective in their advocacy.

Some scholars have refuted the presumed neutrality of alternative high schools and suggest that transfer to alternative high schools is a form of school pushout intertwined with a process of criminalization (Selman, 2017; Fedders, 2017). These studies have leveraged critical analysis of policy documents and the law to underscore that the wide availability of alternative high schools combined with the lack of accountability in the alternative school system may widen the net for what student behaviors, academic standings, and emotional as well as material needs become grounds for removal from mainstream school settings (Selman, 2017; Fedders, 2017, Ewing et al., 2023). While critical policy and legal analysis offers an important counter to the perceived neutrality of alternative high school transfer, what is missing are families' firsthand experiences of transfer, particularly Black families (Selman, 2017; Fedders, 2017; Love et al., 2021)

In this narrative study I center the experiences of Black caregivers whose child transferred from a mainstream high school to an alternative high school. I begin by reviewing the literature on what is known about processes of criminalization in schools, alternative high school transfer, Black caregiver involvement in school, and the value of narrative construction. Then, through narrative thematic analysis of 14 interviews across 7 Black caregivers, I answer the following question- *What narrative dimensions do Black caregivers use to make meaning of alternative high school transfer and the impact transfer had on their family?*

Background

Alternative High School Transfer as a Concern of Criminalization

Since the 1980's the US has been in an "era of mass incarceration" characterized by an ongoing expansion of punitive logics and practices including criminalization, policing, incarceration, and community supervision targeting "unruly" groups, specifically poor

communities of color (Hinton, 2021). Legal scholar Jonathan Simon theorized that, in the era of mass incarceration, the racialized rhetoric of crime and crime management has become entrenched in every aspect of society, including schools (Simon & Silvestre, 2017). The use of school resource officers (SRO's), police departments contracting with school districts to place police in schools, is a material example of the crime management logics and practices embedded in public education. The presence of SRO's in schools is predictive of increased arrests for "disorderly conduct," vaguely defined as student behavior deemed "unreasonable," "alarming," and "provoking". These words are associated with longstanding stereotypes about youth criminality and, unsurprisingly, the presence of an SRO increases arrests and exclusionary outcomes for Black and Latine students compared to white students (Crosse et al., 2022).

Rios (2011) extended theories of criminalization and their application in school settings to include symbolic forms of criminalization- when students' style, manner, academic standing, and needs are labeled deviant. As a result of being labeled deviant school personnel deny symbolically criminalized students "affirmation and dignified treatment through stigmatizing and exclusionary practices" (pg. 39). Cruz & Meyers (2024) outlined how symbolic criminalization facilitates school pushout. When students are symbolically criminalized they are considered a "liability," "not a fit" and, are subsequently removed or coerced to leave mainstream schools. Included in their qualitative sample of practitioners working at the nexus of the public education and criminal legal systems were alternative high school personnel. These alternative school practitioners speculated that symbolic criminalization, "such as the use of microaggressions," were used to hasten student transfer out of mainstream settings into an opaque, privatized, and segregated system of alternative high schools.

What remains absent from the literature on processes of criminalization in schools and alternative high schools is, first, empirical accounts of transfer and potentially related experiences of criminalization and, second, the impact transfer has on families. The lack of firsthand accounts is especially troubling in the face of an expanding alternative high school system (Vogell & Fresques, 2017). Without the knowledge and perspectives of those most impacted by transfer, districts may increasingly contract with private alternative high school operators and possibly "widen the net" for what student needs become grounds for transfer. Further, despite being absent in the literature on criminalization and school pushout, caregivers are often physically present in high schools for parent-teacher conferences, student enrollment, school pick up, assemblies, and extracurricular events such as sports games. It is possible that caregivers, not just students, are being symbolically criminalized for their manner, style, and needs and that caregivers also experience racial microaggressions that facilitate pushout.

Black Caregiver Involvement in School

The possibility that Black caregivers could be symbolically criminalized in their child's school contradicts status quo ideas of family involvement in education. Most often operationalized as caregiver attendance to school-sanctioned meetings and activities, "parental involvement" has been conceptualized as schools seeking out engagement with caregivers and families benefitting from such engagement (Christianakis, 2011; Lai and Vadeboncoeur, 2013; Marchand et al., 2019). However, in reality, school practitioners rely on narrowly constructed norms of presentation, parenting, and family life to evaluate the legitimacy of caregivers (Love et al., 2021). Research has demonstrated that Black caregivers' perceived divergence from these socially constructed norms can become grounds for the withholding of resources and supports (Marchand et al. 2019).

One salient example is caregiver involvement in the construction of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) established legal parameters for how caregivers can be involved in disability identification, placement, service delivery decision-making, and IEP disputes. White middle-class caregivers are more likely to be credentialed as "good parents" by practitioners and thus, are able to make use of their time in IEP meetings to advocate for their child. In contrast, Black caregivers are put in a subordinate position by practitioners and have to allocate precious time during IEP meetings to justify their legal right to be engaged in the process (Buren, Maggin & Brown, 2018). This indicates that the racialized-classed norms of caregiver involvement limit Black caregivers' ability to exercise their legal rights in school settings.

The Use of Narrative Construction in Challenging Criminalization

Narrative scholars maintain that stories are more than data; they are a process of ontological construction. By telling stories we construct new realities, form identities, and make meaning of social context (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). This ontological and epistemological commitment to narrative was famously articulated by Clandinin & Connelly (2004) as "[living] storied lives on storied landscapes" (pg. 60). Drawing from the philosophy of John Dewey, Clandinin & Connelly (2004) locate storied experience within a three-dimensional space of time, place, and sociality. The dimensions of time and place emphasize the importance of context-bound analysis whereas the dimension of sociality underscores the relational nature of experience, specifically that narratives reflect an interactive social process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). Contemporary narrative scholars have identified the usefulness and the limitations of this three-dimensional space, noting that the original foundations of narrative inquiry did not consider how power structures the time and place we

navigate nor how sociality includes experiences of collective struggle or power (Woodiwiss et al., 2017).

In response to these limitations, the narrative tradition has undergone what Green (2021) termed “a complex evolution in recent decades” to challenge master narratives and create counter narratives (pg. 114). Master narratives are scripts that “specify and [control] how some social processes are carried out” often restricting who can be a storyteller and thus, who has meaningful insight on policy and practice (Stanley, 2007, pg. 14). Counter narratives “act to deconstruct the master narratives [and offer] alternatives to the dominant discourse” (Stanley, 2007, pg. 14). Counter narratives have been used to connect the narrative dimensions used by individuals and groups to oppressive social structures with a commitment to lessening the durability of such structures. To demonstrate, queer theory has been merged with narrative inquiry to challenge “the Grand Narrative of heterosexism” (Steelman, 2016) while scholars of Latin Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) have amplified testimonios as a narrative method to explore racial oppression and facilitate justice for Latine communities (Green, 2021).

Aligned with the present study, one process that has received increasing attention from critical narrative scholars is the exchange between narrative construction and carceral institutions. I regard the narratives of Black caregivers as an analytic window into family life- a family’s past, present and future schooling experience- as well as a vantage point to study processes of criminalization within the education system and the master narratives that naturalize those processes. In doing so I recognize Black caregivers as worldbuilders and creators of knowledge whose perspective is a catalyst for change. Through narrative thematic analysis of 14 interviews across 7 Black caregivers I answer the following question, *What narrative dimensions*

do Black caregivers use to make meaning of alternative high school transfer and the impact transfer had on their family?

Method

Narrative Tradition

This narrative study stems from a larger project examining alternative high school transfer. In this analysis I engage narrative both ontologically and epistemologically. More plainly put, I emphasize story as a practice of constructing new truths about ourselves and the world as well as a form of knowledge production and sharing (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Scharp & Beck, 2017). This approach is rooted in interpretive philosophies of science where knowledge about the social world is contextual and socially constructed (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This philosophical stance is threaded through my use of quotes, and visuals to explain conceptual findings drawn from narrative thematic analysis. Use of narrative methods guides my inductive analysis to ultimately expand and critique prevailing conceptualizations of alternative high school transfer. These ideas are not only entrenched in the public education system but speak to core logics and practices advanced across US society about who is deemed a storyteller and who can fully participate in public life.

Site Selection and Recruitment

The broader project this study is drawn from was constructed as a dual embedded case study of two public high schools in a Midwest urban district—Carver High School and Edison High School[12] (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). I began the case selection process using administrative data. I then engaged primary sources (e.g. local media published over the last 50 years) about the schools as well as spoke to key informants (e.g. Black alumni) about their family's experience in

[12] The names of the schools have been changed.

the schools. Together, these sources of information offered a multisystemic framing of "the case," which enhanced my narrative analysis by providing a rich understanding of the context families' stories were embedded within and what those stories could illuminate about alternative school transfer (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Sonday et al., 2020).

Carver and Edison were well resourced and desirable high schools located in affluent neighborhoods. Additionally, both schools had disproportionately high rates of Black students transferring to alternative schools compared to students of other racial groups. The primary difference between Carver and Edison in the administrative data, across primary sources, and throughout key informant interviews were the schools' racial histories. For the past 5 years over 80% of the Carver student body had identified as Black whereas at Edison, the student body was more evenly split between Black (22%), Latine (35%), and white students (28%). Primary sources and key informants described Carver as an "elite" academic setting and important Black cultural institution. In contrast, Edison was regarded as a "rigorous" high school through its association with white affluence. This association came from Edison's location and student population. Edison was located in an affluent, majority white neighborhood. Further, in a system context where white families were about a third of the municipality but only 10% of the district, the over 20% white identifying, largely affluent, segment of the student body at Edison was widely interpreted within the district as a symbol of academic rigor.

I facilitated a total of 14 interviews with 7 mothers (see Table 13). Over a 12-month period I used a convenience recruitment strategy to contact all the caregivers whose students had transferred out of Carver or Edison to an alternative high school. With the exception of one

white-identifying mother from Edison[13], all of the caregivers who engaged in the research process identified as Black women and as single mothers raising Black children. I anticipated these racial demographics, given the racialized patterns of alternative school transfer across the U.S. and within the district (Carver et al., 2010; Fedders, 2017). The prevalence of mothers reflects the well documented gendered expectations of caregiving in the U.S., particularly as caregiving relates to schooling (Barker, 2011). The majority of mothers had a multigenerational relationship with the schools, having attended themselves or having family members who attended, and were zoned to Carver and Edison as their neighborhood school[14]. The majority of mothers at Carver had graduated from college and were not the first in their family to graduate from college. None of the mothers at Edison completed high school, though several obtained a General Education Diploma (GED) as adults. Most mothers in my study had multiple children and experienced a daughter transferring to an alternative high school. The majority of mothers recruited from Carver experienced the oldest daughter in the family transferring to an alternative school whereas at Edison the majority of mothers experienced the youngest daughter transferring. One mother from Carver had a twin son and daughter who simultaneously transferred to an alternative high school. All participants received 20 dollars in cash for each interview.

[13] I interviewed one white identifying mother at Edison whose child transferred to alternative high school. While her interviews were removed from this analysis, I referred to the mother's narrative and my memos about her story as a point of comparison to examine how white racialization differently impacted her family's experience.
[14] These families attended Carver and Edison because they lived within an attendance boundary and were zoned to Carver and Edison.

Table 13: Parent information

School	Participant[15]	Number of[16] interviews	Participant identities
Carver			
	Crystal	2	Single mother, graduated from college, neighborhood family
	Jessica	2	Single mother, did not graduate from college, neighborhood family
	Jennifer	2	Single mother, graduated from college, neighborhood family
	Lisa	3	Single mother, graduated from college, neighborhood family
Edison	Sebrina	2	Single mother, did not graduate high school, neighborhood family
	Jane	2	Single mother, did not graduate high school, not a neighborhood family
	Akilah	1	Single mother, did not graduate high school, neighborhood family

Facilitating Narrative Interviews

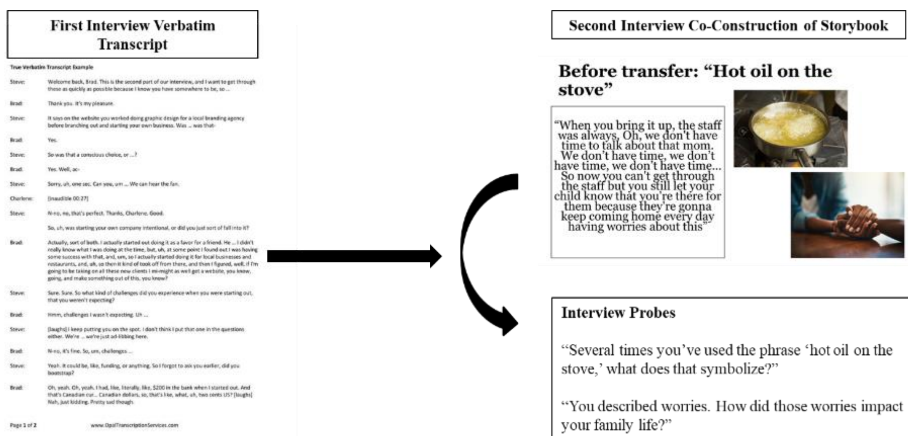
I engaged narrative inquiry within the case study to bring forward the experiences of Black families navigating alternative high school transfer (Sonday et al., 2020). The specific narrative approaches I used included longitudinal interviewing, co-construction of story, and visual methods (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Prosser, 2007). I designed a narrative longitudinal interview protocol oriented around the creation of "storybooks" (see Figure 14). The first in-

[15] Participants selected their own pseudonyms
[16]During the second interview, Lisa asked to be interviewed a third time because her family's story was still "ongoing." As result, her storybook chapters were longer than other participants. Akilah was not interviewed a second time and did not construct a storybook. However, due to the design of the longitudinal interview protocols, her first interview could be included in the narrative thematic analysis.

depth interview lasted 80 minutes and prioritized rapport building as well as asking exploratory, narrative questions about the mother's experience of alternative high school transfer. To demonstrate, I asked mothers "if your family's experience was a movie, what kind of movie would it be?" to facilitate the beginnings of narrative construction. I then followed with probes about "characters," "setting," "plot," and "tone" in the transfer process.

During the second interview, I extended this narrative approach by explicitly engaging co-construction of story and visual methods. I brought the verbatim transcript of the first interview and supported participants in selecting quotes from the transcript, titling chapters, and selecting images from the internet or photos taken on their personal devices. The storybooks were structured chronologically, telling the story of family life *before transfer, during transfer,* and *after transfer*. The process of co-constructing the storybooks took 90 minutes and enabled me to probe deeply about the narrative dimensions participants used to describe their experience of transfer. At the end of the research process the mothers received a copy of their storybook. These narrative approaches also served as forms of member checking and analytic validation, allowing me to verify participants' meaning across multiple forms of media (e.g. images and cinematic references) and across time (i.e. 2-3 interview time points) (Sonday et al., 2020).

Figure 14: Example of storybook method with parents



I engaged narrative inquiry to emphasize *process* for the participants and for myself. My research question necessitated asking Black caregivers about their family's experience of alternative high school transfer, a politically charged and emotionally laden topic. I designed a narrative protocol that prioritized rapport building and facilitated the interviews so that participants led the construction of their familial stories. This narrative approach required me to engage in a reflective process with specific attention to how my identities as a white, cis-woman with 6 years of social work experience, as well as my emerging identity as a mother, shaped the co-constructive narrative process. I facilitated interviews with mothers while pregnant and after giving birth. The intersection of these identities combined with my own professional and personal experiences served as catalysts for discussing specific domains of experience, for example motherhood, while muting others, namely racialized and gendered features of criminalization. Though experiences of criminalization were often mentioned in the first interview, the co-construction of storybooks in the second interview facilitated the rapport building and reciprocity necessary to meaningfully explore the experiences of criminalization mothers and their children were subjected to during the transfer process.

Analysis

I used thematic narrative analysis to analyze transcripts and participant storybooks. As opposed to traditional thematic analysis, which identifies themes across qualitative data, thematic narrative analysis privileges the examination of narrative dimensions within intact stories (Reissman, 2008). As articulated by Scharp & Beck (2017), "In other words, researchers should designate an entire story as a "type," or in this case, as an identity, as opposed to illuminating the themes within each narrative that speak to identity construction" (pg. 137). Aligned with thematic narrative analysis, entire stories served as the unit of analysis. This process consisted of

five steps: (1) becoming familiar with the data, (2) identifying embedded narrative dimensions used by mothers, (3) defining and naming the dimensions, (4) generating story arcs based on the narrative dimensions that answer the guiding question, "*What narrative dimensions do Black caregivers use to make meaning of alternative high school transfer and the impact transfer had on their family?*" and (5) identifying exemplars.

To refamiliarize myself with participants' narrative process, I relistened to participants' longitudinal interviews while reading the verbatim transcripts. Next, I read within participants' interviews to identify narrative dimensions. For example, one narrative dimension that consistently emerged across stories was participants' use of temporality to construct the story of transfer- was transfer narrated as a single event or an evolving series of events? I then determined whether the use of narrative dimensions coalesced into a particular story arc. For example, the narrative dimensions of, temporality and sociality (who mothers spoke to about transfer and description of those interactions) coalesced into "we were targeted" and "pushed up against a wall" arcs. Exemplars were then identified during the verification procedures detailed below.

To determine the validity of my thematic narrative analytic process, I conducted two verification procedures: (1) reengaging the audit trail, and (2) identifying exemplars. First, I kept an audit trail of detailed notes to illuminate decisions about the coding of narrative dimensions and emergence of narrative arcs. These notes facilitated the process of selecting exemplars. Before publication I intend utilizing investigator triangulation as a third form of verification. I will train a research assistant in narrative thematic analysis and have them independently read the stories to identify narrative dimensions and emergent identities. While the research assistant may use different names for the narrative arcs, the emergence of no new or separate arcs from the

ones I created would demonstrate verification. In the case of new or separate arcs, another round of analysis and verification would occur.

Findings

Through narrative thematic analysis three narrative arcs of alternative high school transfer arose: “being targeted,” “pushed up against a wall,” and “letting the process play out.” While forming these arcs two additional emergent findings arose. First, Black families experienced alternative high school transfer as a form of school pushout facilitated by symbolic criminalization. The narrative dimensions used to construct these arcs emphasized experiences of symbolic criminalization that lead to profiling, stigmatization, humiliation, and the withholding of resources (Rios, 2001). While symbolic criminalization facilitated school pushout in all the narrative arcs, mothers’ accounts of the pushout “moment” ranged from explicit exclusion, to coercion, to passive neglect (Cruz & Meyers, 2024). The second finding is that symbolic criminalization targets family systems, making school pushout a familial experience rather than an individual student experience. Mothers articulated how themselves and their children, separately and together, were subjected to symbolic criminalization and experienced pushout as a family.

The findings are structured by the three narrative arcs of transfer, “being targeted,” “pushed up against a wall,” and “letting the process play out.” Aligned with thematic narrative analysis, I chose one story that was compelling and represented core features of that narrative arc. I used the storybooks participants constructed to select images and titles for the representative stories. Quotes and visuals from the individual interviews are used to provide a link between the raw narrative data and the representative story. At the end of each

representative story I describe what the particular narrative arc illuminates about alternative high school transfer and its impact on families.

Being Targeted: "We Were Flagged"

In Lisa's story a series of events over a three-year period made her recognize her family was being *"targeted"* by her child's mainstream school. Lisa's suspicion began when she enrolled her daughter in Carver and encountered the principal. In the enrollment process, the principal reviewed her daughter's grades from middle school and immediately began discouraging the family from enrolling:

> "It was just very negative, just judgmental, and what a horrible way to be introduced to your new school. [The principal] off the bat is judging you based on something that's irrelevant at this point. You graduated [8th grade], you live in the neighborhood, you have a right to be here, but she was going down with 'Oh, these grades [are bad]" and 'What happened?' and 'You know this is Carver we don't *do this*' and just all this stuff! And she looked at our address and she said, "Oh, okay. You live here? Is this your real address?' And I said, 'I'm sorry. Yes, that's our real address.'"

Lisa's daughter was enrolling in Carver as a student who lived within the attendance boundary. Therefore, middle school grades should have been irrelevant and not subject to a review process. Lisa described this first interaction as *"just very negative"* and a tactic meant to discourage her daughter from enrolling in her neighborhood high school. To Lisa, the principal's focus on her daughters' grades was her way of evaluating the family. Lisa described Carver as having *"a culture of excellence,"* a school that valued individual students obtaining *"high ranks"* and *"millions of dollars in scholarships."* The principal was not aware that Lisa and Lisa's mother had graduated from Carver and, in that moment, evaluated Lisa's family and made it clear that she did not see the family as *"fitting the mold."*

The *"targeting"* events continued when her daughter returned to Carver in-person after the COVID-19 pandemic and her Sophomore year of remote schooling. During her daughter's

remote Sophomore year, Lisa's mother passed away while living in the family home. Though COVID-19 had a profound impact on Lisa's family, it was Carver's response that continued to make Lisa feel her family was being *"pigeonholed."* After the pandemic Lisa's daughter struggled to attend school regularly, which Lisa attributed to her daughter's *"depression," "grief,"* and a pervasive experience of *"feeling lost"* at Carver. In her daughter's Junior year, Lisa was *"flagged"* to attend group conferences filled with other Black mothers in *"similar situations"*:

> "I had to be called in for conferences with the other parents. The way that we were talked to…was as if we were a bunch of drug addict, irresponsible parents who don't care, don't have a handle on our kids. We were painted with a broad brush, and talked to any kind of way. I was totally offended. So, that's why I say our experience was horrible because they put you in a box and it's hard to get out of it. You have no idea what any of these children are going through. [Carver is] very elitist, and I'm saying that coming from a single-parent household where we are upper-middle class, and I still felt offended. How dare you treat [me] like this!"

To Lisa the *"box"* her family was being put in was filled with stereotypes of Black single mothers as *"drug addicts"* and *"irresponsible parents."* Notably Lisa stated that her family were *"upper-middle class,"* but school administrators treated her as if they assumed she was *"uneducated."* The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that Black families experienced higher rates of COVID-19 cases and deaths than white families (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). While occurring outside of school, these racially inequitable patterns nevertheless impact experiences of schooling and facilitate educational inequities. Lisa recalled that she was in the conference with other mothers in *"similar situations,"* signaling that her daughter was not the only student at Carver struggling after the pandemic. Lisa was astounded that, rather than reaching out to learn what families *"were going through,"* Carver administrators responded by hosting conferences meant to punish and problematize parents. From her perspective, the conferences were a tactic meant to *"weed out"* the *"riff raff."*

Lisa described her final interaction with the principal as *"full circle."* She was called to Carver after her daughter had gotten into a physical alteration. While Lisa did not *"downplay"* what she perceived to be the severity of her daughter's actions, she also knew that this was *"out of character"* and the first time her daughter had gotten into an altercation. In the meeting with the principal and her daughter it was clear to Lisa that, once again her family had been *"flagged"*: *"Let's pull your records. Oh, your grades look like this, your attendance looks like this, and you're fighting? Oh no, you're not gonna graduate on time. You gotta go."* In this final meeting the principal brought up transfer to an alternative high school, another clear evaluation that Lisa's family was a *"failure"*: *"[What the principal said to us] felt like a script from, something [she's] read to other people before. That this is Carver's way. There was very little room for understanding. It was just you don't fit, so we need to find something else for you. The principal said [to my daughter] 'This is not the school for you.'"*

To Lisa the notion that her family did not *"belong"* in their neighborhood high school, to which her daughter was legally guaranteed access, *"was probably the most audacious of things stated."* However, after being explicitly told to leave Carver, Lisa's daughter soon transferred to an alternative high school. The generational bonds Lisa had with Carver as a cultural institution and a second-generation graduate made her family's experience all the more startling. As Lisa exclaimed: *"They're so much a part of us. Beyond me going there and my mother... all these generations I talked about, numerous friends, family, people that live in my building, generations of their families have gone there. It's a part of my upbringing and my community. I mean, they're as much my history as anything else. I have so many affinities towards them that just made our personal experience disappointing."*

The process of narrative construction, *"placing my experiences back to back,"* led Lisa to reflect on her elementary-age daughter's educational future:

> "I can no longer base [her high school experience] on what my experience was, or my mother's, or anyone else's… but my oldest daughter is the nearest most relevant experience and that's been eye opening where I may need to allow [my youngest to have] options, to be a little bit more open so that she can go to a school that nurtures her in the way that she's needs, because I now see that, you know, for all that Carver offers, it can be a challenging place for a [disabled student]."

The experience of alternative school transfer forced Lisa to reconsider her family's educational future and how her youngest daughter's academic needs could be symbolically criminalized at Carver. In her third interview Lisa selected Figure 15 to illustrate the quote above. In the image, one red figure turns left while a herd of blue figures go right. To Lisa, this image represented the past- Lisa's family being told to leave Carver- and the future- her family turning away from Carver. Lisa's image selection occurred at a point in the narrative construction where she emphasized the value of self-determination and situating the problem outside of her family. In the narrative Lisa created, her and her daughter were not *"total failures."* Lisa's family had experienced hardship outside of school and were *"targeted"* for alternative school transfer inside of school.

Figure 15: Lisa turning away from Carver after being targeted

Lisa's experience of being explicitly told her daughter was not a *"fit"* and had to transfer to an alternative high school were central features of the "being targeted" narrative arc. This

active tactic of school pushout was facilitated by "symbolic criminalization" (Rios, 2001; Cruz & Meyers, 2024). In Lisa's story the experiences of school enrollment, parent conferences, and parent-student-administrator meetings held meaning beyond the technological aspects of the practices. Lisa described these practices as profiling and stigmatizing. Notably, school personnel targeted Lisa's identity as a parent in ways that were overtly racialized, gendered, and classed. While these practices of symbolic criminalization may be less dramatic than material criminalization in schools, such as the arrest or expulsion of a student, they nevertheless produced the outcome of Lisa's daughter leaving a mainstream school and transferring into an alternative high school.

Pushed Up Against a Wall: "'Deal With this Shit, or You're Gonna Go"

Jessica constructed a narrative encompassing events over a two-year period that coalesced into her feeling like she and her family had been *"pushed up against a wall."* The story began with Jessica's daughter being severely bullied at Carver her Freshman year, *"It was a lot of verbal stuff. She had a lot of people coming up to her and actually trying to hit her. Pictures were taken of her, derogatory sayings posted on the pictures and then posted onto the internet."* Jessica brought her *"anxieties*" about her daughter's safety to the Carver administration but felt those concerns were repeatedly dismissed, *"I let the administrators know, 'I feel like this needs to be talked about.' And they just said, 'Oh, well we don't have time right now. We have 2,000 other kids.' That just was like, okay, now you're disregarding what I'm saying."* After several brief meetings with a Dean, Jessica finally got a meeting scheduled with the assistant principal. In the weeks leading up to the meeting, the bullying intensified with threats of gun violence and Jessica became increasingly distraught about her daughter's physical safety and possible thoughts of suicide. Jessica characterized this time for her family as a

"shaking bottle of hot oil on the stove." For Jessica the metaphor of *"hot oil on the stove"* reflected the intensity of her family's situation and the stakes of what could happen if the situation went unaddressed.

Prior to the meeting with the assistant principal, Jessica held out hope that advocating for her daughter with the right administrator would be effective. Her daughter was an honors student with near perfect attendance and Carver was their neighborhood high school. Jessica had also begun policing herself while engaging with school administrators. During her first parent-administrator meeting with a Dean Jessica received clear signals that she was perceived as escalating her daughter's situation and needed to "adjust" herself:

> "That first meeting with the school, it didn't go so well. I was one of those moms who was super irate and I had to bring myself down. The Dean got me on the straight and narrow track. I told myself, 'You know what Jessica, after that first interaction, I'm gonna make sure that I never have an interaction with them like that again. I'm gonna make sure I'm controlling myself.' Not to mention, I am doing this for my daughter. She's watching me. She can't see me act like that because then she's gonna feel like she has to do that [to be listened to]. So I started correcting myself. Each and every time I started talking to [administrators], I make sure to watch my tone, not use profanity, and different things like that. After me readjusting myself, the Dean let me know that we are at a point where we can work together."

Jessica did not want to be perceived as *"going off"* on school administrators and worked to present herself in a manner, that she felt, would garner her daughter support. As a Black woman and single mother Jessica was concerned that her distress over her daughter's situation would be perceived as *"ghetto rachet parenting."* Jessica's specific choice of words aligns with scholarship on how racialized, gendered, and classed social constructions of femininity and motherhood marginalize Black women navigating U.S. systems (Haley, 2016). Throughout her story, Jessica perceived falling outside these constructed expectations as a *"barrier"* and *"corrected"* her tone and mannerisms in an effort to be legible to school administrators as a

mother advocating for her daughter. Further, her account of being put *"on the straight and narrow track"* by the Dean mirrors the narrative construction of people sentenced to probation or mandatory drug treatment. The surveillance of Jessica's behavior in the school made her, not just *"readjust"* her behavior, but shaped her internal construction of the experience and how she saw herself.

Given all of these pieces, her daughter's grades and attendance, Carver being their neighborhood high school, and the effort she put into legibility, Jessica could not imagine a solution that did not involve her daughter continuing her education at Carver. However, in the meeting with the assistant principal, it became clear to Jessica that her and her daughter had been labeled a problem family*: "[The meeting] was very combative. They kept trying to provoke us to do things. That's why I felt it was more of a push to get us out of the school. They wanted us to say, 'Oh, yeah, we're going.' They said 'Well mom we can't kick people out…' But you're also telling me in so many words that you're gonna kick us out. That's when I kinda felt like they were not even hearing the situation and steady pointing the finger to my child."*

In the meeting the assistant principal was the first to mention alternative high school transfer, *"Oh, yeah, they was the first ones to throw out the whole transfer ordeal, because at that point I felt like they were done, like they were done. They no longer wanted us to keep coming in here, they no longer wanted me to keep pushing parent-teacher conferences. They were sick of me."* Jessica left the meeting certain she and her daughter had been stigmatized by school administrators, *"Oh my god, this [assistant principal] thinks that my child is ghetto or rachet… that's not who my baby is,"* yet her daughter was not explicitly told to leave Carver. Instead, she felt that Carver administrators perceived her family to be disruptive and a strain on

their time. Thus, school administrators put the family in an uncomfortable situation so they would leave on their own accord:

> "[The assistant principal] throwing that word [transfer] up… it was to make us feel a little intimidated. I felt pushed up against a wall. 'It's either you're gonna stay [at Carver] and deal with this shit, or you're gonna go.' And that's what made me say, 'I don't have to stay here and deal with this shit. My child can go to any school. She has a 4.0. You're not withholding us from anything.' And it kinda made me also feel like they were taking us out of our neighborhood school, somewhere where we can commute to real easily…"

The demoralizing experience made Jessica and her daughter so *"embarrassed"* that Jessica's daughter transferred to an alternative high school immediately the following day. In her second interview Jessica selected Figure 16, an exposed, flimsy bridge over fast moving water, to illustrate alternative high school transfer as a choice she and her daughter had been *"pushed"* to make. For Jessica the bridge over fast moving water demonstrated the *"high stakes"* of the transfer process for her daughter while the exposed nature of the bridge reflected how emotionally raw and *"unsure"* Jessica felt after being humiliated in front of her daughter by the assistant principal. Jessica could not imagine going back to Carver for support or advice, and, while alternative high school transfer was a *"bridge"* she did not want to cross, Jessica felt transfer had become her daughter's only option.

Figure 16: Lisa's feelings of hurt and the material stakes of transfer

In Jessica's story the formal avenues available to parents advocating for their children were not just dead ends, but *"a pit"* where herself and her daughter were humiliated. The

experience of humiliation and degradation was core to the narrative arc of "pushed up against a wall." School administrators used humiliation to punish Jessica for placing strain on school resources. Similar to the "being targeted" narrative arc, mothers described being symbolically criminalized as "bad parents" and thus subjected to racialized, gendered, and classed microaggressions. Unlike the "being targeted" arc, mothers were not explicitly told their child had to transfer to an alternative high school. Instead the family was strategically made uncomfortable so that they left, seemingly on their own accord.

Letting the Process Play Out: "They Should Have Been More Engaged"

Jane's story did not involve a sequence of escalating interactions with school administrators or a single drastic turning point, instead she constructed a story of transfer where school personnel seemingly *"let the process play out."* Early in her narrative construction Jane described Edison's association with white affluence as desirable and something that initially drew her to the school, *"We haven't been living in the best neighborhoods all our lives. I thought of Edison as a great opportunity for him, you know, this one's going to be our steppingstone to get into college. The kids of different races at Edison are a new experience. The boys in our neighborhood hang out in the streets, hanging with their pants sagging all down, and not using proper grammar, downplaying somebody because they don't want to have dreadlocks and all that stuff in their hair…"* Jane's description of Black children and her neighborhood stemmed from internalized anti-Blackness and the material inequities within the district that made Edison a more resourced setting than her son's neighborhood high school. Jane's son was accepted into Edison his Freshman year through the competitive sports program and with the support of his father, who worked as a security guard at the school.

During the COVID-19 pandemic Jane's son experienced the death of his grandmother, Jane's mother, in the family home. Jane and her son had been the grandmother's primary caregivers before her passing. The loss was a huge *"blow"* to the family:

> "It was a huge blow, you know. My mom's the matriarch of our family. First of all, she's the oldest daughter, it was ten of them, and she was the oldest daughter out of them, so everybody looked up to my mama. Everybody did. So, when she died it was very, very hard on me and my son because she lived with us. It was a struggle. He was in a shell, he just completely shut down. Like he was getting no good grades, like nothing was making him happy."

Jane described her son's *"depression"* as having a severe, abrupt impact on her son's grades and demeanor. While in the mist of her overwhelming grief Jane took comfort in the belief that her son would have access to Edison's numerous academic and mental health resources. Her perception was rooted in her son's position in Edison as a varsity football player with a father who was a school employee as well as the belief that Edison was *"a better environment with more resources"* than their neighborhood high school. However, to Jane's dismay, no one engaged with her son as he steadily fell behind on credits. By senior year, Jane's son had the credits of a Junior which prompted a counselor to suggest alternative high school transfer:

> "Once he was able to get out of the depression I'll call it, then you know, his focus was what are we going to do about school. And of course, Edison, they have to have a certain amount of credits in order to graduate from school, and so in order for me to have him still stay on track with graduating the year that he's supposed to graduate, that was another reason for me to choose to get him out of Edison and to get him in another school where the credit criteria wasn't so extensive."

In the above quote Jane is describing the difference in the graduation requirements at mainstream high schools versus alternative high schools. Mainstream high schools require 24 credits as part of the district's college preparatory curriculum. In contrast alternative high schools follow the state department of education's guidelines which requires 18 credits to graduate high school. The difference in graduate requirements between mainstream and alternative high schools coupled

with anxieties about graduating convinced Jane to transfer her son. In her second interview Jane spent time reflecting on how her son had gotten to Senior year with the credits of a Junior:

> "I was getting through my own struggle and grieving my own self, still having to work, go to work and, put that smile on. While [I was in it] I wasn't thinking about it like that. But I do see the difference now how Edison should have been more engaging with us but they weren't. I just think that they really wasn't putting the time, energy or effort into it. He definitely should have gotten therapy, or they should have suggested therapy for him. More attention to detail to the students… I would say to my child in particular. It's like they just, they didn't never acknowledge what we were going through with our grief. It wasn't acknowledged."

In contrast to Lisa's story, where challenges outside of school were meant with punishment, Jane described neglect by school personnel. During the second interview Jane expressed that the neglect when beyond a failure to refer her son to academic or mental health support services and included a withholding of rapport that she attributed to *"cultural differences"* between her Black son and his white teachers. While creating her storybook she recalled a white male teacher who consistently antagonized her son: *"It was 'Let me see how I can push his buttons. What makes him tick or something like that.' You just, you never know. I never, I never had like a relationship with this teacher. My son wasn't like getting in trouble or anything. He's never been suspended, never had a high school fight and, he's never complained about a teacher before. This was the first time, I know it wasn't my child and that it was that teacher stereotyping him."* The quote aligns with passive tactics of school pushout, where school personnel withhold relationships and feelings of belonging from students of color (Cruz & Meyers, 2024).

To accompany the block quote above, Jane selected an image of Edison for her storybook[17]. She sought out an image online that emphasized the *"nice neighborhood*" Edison

[17] To protect the identity of the school and the participants I have not included the image and instead provide insight into why Jane selected that particular image.

was in and how *"even the school building it's not a rundown, ragged building."* After placing the image of Edison in her storybook she further reflected on the pattern of neglect that caused her son to transfer, *"I was still willing to make the sacrifice, you know, driving across town every day to Edison. I just wanted better for my son. But just because it's a better neighborhood and different demographic of people, doesn't always mean it's better for you."* Jane's choice of words, "*a better neighborhood and different demographic of people,"* is a reference to the racial-class status of Edison while the closing words, *"doesn't always mean it's better for you,"* represented how Edison's status of white affluence did not translate to more opportunities for her child. Edison was a well-resourced school and, from Jane's perspective, the withholding of those resources overtime facilitated her son's alternative high school transfer (Ray, 2019).

Jane's experience of witnessing her son struggle academically and emotionally without intervention by school personnel was central to the narrative arc of "letting the process play out." As opposed to being explicitly told to leave or being made uncomfortable, mothers whose story followed this arc described a process of symbolic criminalization that placed their child at the margins of the school, which facilitated a pattern of neglect. The neglect included withholding supportive services and positive relationships, signaling a passive waiting for transfer to become the student's only option. Notably, this withholding did not occur because Carver and Edison are schools without mental health or academic support services. Instead, the narrative arc of "letting the process play out" demonstrates how racialized patterns of engagement and neglect within a school can marginalize Black students overtime, leading to their eventual transfer. Jane's experience sheds light on institutional practices within education that passively wait for students to leave or, as another mother articulated, *"set up"* students to fail (Cruz & Myers, 2024).

Discussion

To my knowledge, this is the first qualitative study of alternative high school transfer that focused on the impact transfer had on family life. Two contributions arose from Black mothers' narrative construction. First, mothers articulated alternative high school transfer as a form of school pushout facilitated by symbolic criminalization. Building on Cruz & Meyers's (2024) interviews with practitioners, mothers described a range of active and passive pushout tactics that included explicitly being told to transfer, coerced to transfer and, neglected until transfer became a student's only option. In their narratives, mothers described how their child's academic and/or emotional needs were deemed deviant, a liability, or signaled that their child was not a fit. Despite being labeled deviant and pushed out, mothers stressed that their children did not break the law and rarely broke formal school policies. This indicates that, as opposed to expulsion which is a highly monitored legal process requiring a judge, students can be removed from mainstream school settings for a variety of academic and emotional needs with little oversight through alternative high school transfer.

Second, mothers' narrative construction demonstrates how symbolic criminalization targets family systems, making school pushout a familial experience rather than an individual student experience. In narratives, transfer was proceeded by experiences of symbolic criminalization where mothers' engagement with their child's schooling was labeled deviant, considered bothersome, or went unacknowledged. Previous studies of symbolic criminalization and pushout have conceptualized these processes as individual student experiences and outcomes (Morris, 2016; Skiba, 2014). While useful in motivating advocacy and reforms, this individual student frame has created a pervasive assumption that pushout happens to individual students and has negative implications for individual students. This directly contrasts with what is widely known about schooling—that it is a *familial experience* (Love et al. 2021, Ewing, 2018). My

study draws attention to the unique role schools play in family life and demonstrates how being pushed out of school can pervasively disrupt a family's identity and sense of stability. This reconceptualization of school pushout as a familial experience also broadens our understanding of impact. As Lisa's story demonstrates, the experience of symbolic criminalization and alternative high school transfer made her question a previously held familial story of schooling as well as reconsider her younger daughter's educational future. Future scholars should examine how bearing witness to an older sibling or loved one's experience of school push impacts younger family members educational goals and expectations.

My analysis extends the literatures on symbolic criminalization and Black caregiver involvement by demonstrating how microaggressions were distinctly gendered and aimed at participants' mothering. The literature on symbolic criminalization and Black caregiver involvement has focused on racism, classism, and ableism with less attention to socially constructed norms of motherhood (Love et al., 2021). School practitioners assessed mothers based on narrow expectations of behavior, mannerisms, style, and family structure rooted in white middle-class femininity. Regardless of effort, class-background, or education level, Black mothers were perceived by school practitioners to fall outside these expectations. This perception became rationale for the school to determine the means and ends of caregiver involvement. This differential power dynamic was a form of racialized-gendered social control that was used to invalidate mothers' concerns and act paternally, telling or signaling to mothers that they were incapable and that their family required "intervention" in the form of transfer. Notably this "advice" or "help" was offered without consideration for the mothers' or the child's needs or desires. This paternal stance is distinctly patriarchal and obscured the role of the mainstream school in facilitating alternative high school transfer.

Class-background or education level did not prevent Black mothers in my study from being targeted individually in one-on-one interactions with school personnel or in front of their children. This evokes sociological literature on master status and critical feminist literature on intersectionality indicating that anti-Black racism and patriarchy create distinct barriers to advocacy for Black mothers in the education system and that privileges associated with income level and a college degree may not be protective (Hunt, 2007; Crenshaw, 2013). Further, mothers whose student transferred from Carver tended to have a narrative arc of "being targeted" or "pushed up against a wall" whereas mothers from Edison tended to have an arc of "letting the process play out." Carver was a historically Black high school with a predominantly Black administration whereas Edison was associated with white affluence and had a predominantly white administration. This indicates that white, middle-class, feminine expectations of motherhood can manifest in organizationally distinct pushout practices. Future work should investigate school settings such as Carver where processes of symbolic criminalization may be shaped by within group dynamics such as respectability politics and/or colorism.

While my analysis extends the literature on school pushout and alternative school transfer, it is not without limitations. Due to case selection, I was able to trace how educational status and class background impacted Black families' educational trajectory. More investigation on the intersectional experiences within Black motherhood should be undertaken to understand how other axes of domination such as sexuality, disability, citizenship, and colorism impact family experiences of pushout. While my focus on caregivers and family-level analysis is an important contribution, the voices of students are missing from this analysis. Future studies of alternative high school transfer should engage students who transferred as well as other family members who witnessed or were impacted by transfer.

Implications for Policy

Alternative high school transfer policies have emerged across the country in urban districts such as Denver Public Schools, Chicago Public Schools, D.C. Public School, San Francisco Public Schools, and Atlanta Public Schools. I recommend that districts include family advocates in the transfer policies. Families in my study experienced alternative high school transfer as a form of school pushout and were subjected to micro-aggressions in conversations about transfer. Based on these experiences I recommend that these advocates be an established part of the transfer process where they are brought into mainstream schools to facilitate conversations about transfer with families. In addition to ensuring that conversations about transfer are respectful and supportive, the transition specialist can reduce administrative burden in transfer by supporting families in selecting an alternative high school to transfer to and ensure that students' records (e.g. IEP and transcripts) move with the student.

In addition to improving families' experience of transfer, districts should improve families' experiences in mainstream school to prevent transfer. Most mothers in my study communicated that their child was behind on credits for grade level and was not attending school regularly. Districts should consider access to credit recovery opportunities in mainstream schools and how to identify students for these services earlier to prevent transfer. In the cases of Carver and Edison, neither school at the time of the study offered daytime credit recovery or summer school, which some mothers felt impacted their child's trajectory. Similarly, districts should consider what engagement programs exist for students and how accessible those programs are. Carver and Edison had a variety of varsity sports programs and arts programs that required an audition process. Most mothers in my study described how their child was not able to access these programs. The population of students most vulnerable to alternative high school transfer

may be a group of students who would benefit from extra-curricular programs that do not involve try-outs or auditions and may also benefit from school-based mental health programs.

Implications for School-based Practice

My methodological approach offers a significant contribution to school-based practice. In the education system symbolically criminalized students are often described through institutional language, “low attendance,” “behind on credit for grade level,” and “behavioral problem.” Mothers acknowledged that their child had been repeatedly described in this way by school practitioners. The process of narrative construction encouraged mothers to describe themselves and their children in their own words. Integrating techniques of narrative therapy into parent-teacher meetings could transform potentially harmful interactions into “sparkling moments”- an empowering interaction where caregivers are actively listened to, hear their words reflected back to them, and are able to be a partner in their child’s educational process. Additionally, integrating narrative techniques into interactions with caregivers would support practitioners in building a holistic view of the students’ case, a core practice competency for school-based social workers (Franklin, 2024). While the narrative protocol I constructed for this study was extensive, narrative techniques can be taken up and integrated into generalist approaches to social work practice.

My analysis also demonstrates a need for narrative individual and group therapy services oriented toward parents who have been criminalized by the education system. Through their narrative construction mothers in my study externalized the problem of transfer and identified “innovative moments” where they took creative action to regain self-determination over their child’s educational trajectory (Chan, Ngai & Wong, 2012; Matos & Santos, 2009; Goncalves, Matos & Santos, 2009). However, a clinical narrative service could deepen the meaning making

process. Given the influence master narratives about schooling and caregiving had in my study, I recommend services that integrate an analysis of power with narrative therapy. For example, Dumaresque et al. (2017) reconceptualized the three steps of narrative therapy to facilitate healing for individuals and groups as well as contribute to structural change: 1) identifying the problem became identifying the dominant discourse, 2) externalizing the problem became politicizing the problem story, and 3) developing the alternative story became developing alternative discourse. Currently, there is not a visible coalition of caregivers and families impacted by alternative high school transfer. In addition to providing clinical services, a narrative process could facilitate opportunities for these families to gather, identify shared experiences, and communicate unmet needs directly to districts.

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Conclusion

My data demonstrates how institutional and organizational factors shape inequities in alternative high school transfer and the limitations of an alternative high school transfer policy in preventing such inequities. Not only do mainstream practitioners bear witness to pervasive inequities in the education system with little power to change them, they also must navigate competing policies and expectations. Practitioners wield alternative high school transfer in response to cumulative inequities and to address competing priorities. Yet, alternative high school transfer is a form of school exclusion that threatens families' sense of stability. Together this makes alternative high school transfer not only an ineffective way to respond to students but an extension of the carceral logics and practices in education. Subsequently, the costs of transfer cannot be avoided through a policy that atomizes institutional problems by punitively monitoring practitioners.

Contributions

To my knowledge, my dissertation is the first system-level examination of alternative high school transfer. Much of the discourse about alternative high schools as "dropout prevention" or "pushout" has been conceptual or rooted in the evaluation of a single school model. In addition to providing empirical insight into an otherwise invisible phenomenon, my data foregrounds the perspectives of those most impacted by alternative high school transfer-students, practitioners, and caregivers. It is an issue of epistemic injustice when 1) alternative high schools are widely available, used, and yet ignored and, 2) when the commonly accepted knowledge about alternative high schools was established far from the people most impacted.

My dissertation merges disparate theories and methods. I leverage administrative data in the fourth largest district in the US to measure how racialized school characteristics predict

alternative high school transfer. By merging narrative inquiry with street-level theory in the unique case of racially-conscious policy making, I was able to trace racialized features of discretion in practitioners' interpretation and enactment of policy. In my analysis of family narratives, I demonstrate that symbolic criminalization and pushout impacts family systems, not just individual students. Lastly, by bringing together these theoretical and methodological approaches, I provide an important overarching contribution- alternative high school transfer is a form of school pushout that illuminates broader contradictions in public education, particularly the ways mainstream schools fail historically marginalized families.

Pushout is not simply a matter of individual bias

Narrative interviews with district administrators and school practitioners demonstrate the difference between acknowledging racism and having a structural analysis of racism. In a system where "school pushout" is widely understood to be a racialized problem, individuals constructed narratives that exempt themselves from a racialized process. In taking up a racial analysis, district administrators demonstrated an individualistic understanding of racism- that individual practitioners exerted racial bias and were pushing students out. While practitioners named the role of structural inequities in facilitating transfer, they also grappled with how their organizations shaped their perception of which students could remain at the mainstream school and which students should transfer to alternative high schools. The understanding of transfer as a problem was embedded in the participants' role in the bureaucracy, indicating that bureaucracy obscures a structural analysis. Further practitioners' perception of students' and discretionary practices in transfer was shaped by their organizational context.

This is why alternative high school transfer is a complex problem that cannot be effectively addressed in one policy. District administrators cannot see what is happening in

schools, school practitioners have a difficult time interpreting the goals of administrators, and families get caught in the crossfire. The narrative misalignment between administrators and school practitioners indicates that alternative high school transfer is not a dropout prevention strategy and is instead a "release valve" that makes mainstream schools appear to operate more successfully and allows districts to not be responsible for problematized students (Kelly, 1993). Both district administrators and school practitioners have a vested interest in alternative high school transfer and thus, should not be the only participants in the policy process. Students and their caregivers have a critical perspective on what facilitated their transfer and what transfer did or did not do for them.

Alternative high school transfer is a release valve

The prevailing belief about alternative schools as a dropout prevention strategy provides a veneer of legitimacy to alternative settings. I do believe alternative high schools are strategic but not as dropout prevention. Unchecked privatization, vague parameters for transfer, and no accountability to offer quality education or services makes alternative high schools a slippery organizational form in the education system. By pushing students to alternative high schools and calling it an "alternative" to dropout we have created new low-profile ways to make a profit from the docilizing and responsibilizing of Black students. As an extension of the carceral state, alternative high schools atomize social problems and make the rest of the education system appear to be functioning more effectively that it is by 1) containing "unruly" populations and 2) allowing the hoarding of resources in other parts of the system.

To demonstrate, the number of students enrolled in alternative high schools in CPS is comparable to the number of CPS students enrolled in selective enrollment high schools. However, the attention given to alternative high schools pales in comparison to the attention

given to selective enrollments schools. Further, the focus on selective enrollment schools has been oriented toward ensuring that the “right” students are entering such spaces. In contrast, few question if the “right” students are enrolled in alternative high schools. I conceptualize selective enrollment schools and alternative high schools to be on opposite ends of the public education system. While these settings might seem disconnected, I argue that the existence of “elite” education settings where resources are hoarded hinges on the existence of an “alternative” setting where students labeled deviant are contained. The constructed (in)visibility of selective enrollment and alternative high schools as distinct school types underscores that the current education system functions as intended- to ensure that not all members of society have the economic, political, and social capital necessary to participate.

The over half a million students enrolled in alternative high schools currently need our attention. Rather than atomizing social problems onto practitioners through punitive monitoring, I suggest we start by giving practitioners information about what happens to students once they transfer and meaningfully engage with them about the information. In my dissertation, practitioners' narratives contained dimensions of symbolic criminalization and pushout as well as the assumption that alternative high schools would be a better setting for students. While providing accurate information about the lack of quality services and low graduation rates in alternative high schools may not prevent all forms of racialized discretion, the lack of information only reinforces the veneer of transfer as dropout prevention. At the very least, practitioners would not be able to rebrand pushout practices as dropout prevention.

I also call for districts to stop contracting with alternative high school operators and to not open more alternative high schools. I also call on state policymakers to not pass laws making it easier for alternative high schools to expand without oversight (as is the case in Illinois).

Alternative high schools are emerging as the part of the conservative platform in education, articulated locally by former mayoral candidate and CEO of CPS Paul Vallas who campaigned to open more alternative high schools in empty buildings as part of his vision for an expanded choice program. The expansion of alternative high schools, in the vision of people like Paul Vallas, only serves the new Republican Strategy- the gutting of public education state-by-state, district-by-district. Journalists, community organizers, and neighbors should mobilize around current alternative high schools to create transparency and address issues of quality. In this mobilization I strongly advise against branding alternative high schools as serving specific populations or student needs, which could risk justifying expansion of the alternative school ecosystem. Instead, this work should focus on providing curriculum and supportive services that strengthen existing community infrastructure and ties families have to that infrastructure.

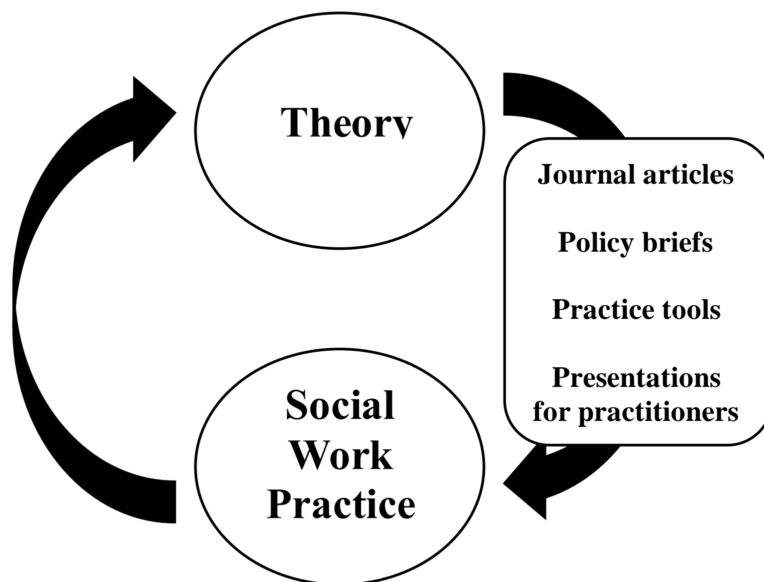
In addition to addressing the alternative high school ecosystem, we need to transform the public education system. Ultimately, alternative high school transfer is a "canary in the coal mine" and should be considered a "signaling mechanism, pointing to places where the structures meant to sustain young people and their communities have become dangerously unstable" (Ewing et al., 2023, pg. 22). My dissertation joins the call for abolition- the abolition of a society and an education system that could have alternative high schools, could passively wait for students to "drop out," and could hoard resources in select schools or select districts. It is an ambitious democratic revitalization of public education.

Public Impact

In addition to academic contributions, I am translating my dissertation work to caregivers, practitioners, and policy makers (see Figure 17). I am writing a brief that will translate my findings to policymakers and will be publicly available on the UChicago

Consortium website. Given the implications of my narrative method for direct practice, I am creating a narrative facilitation guide that practitioners, community leaders, or caregivers can use to make meaning of their transfer experiences individually or in group settings. This practice tool is being co-authored with a CPS partner, has involved reengaging caregivers in rounds of feedback, and will be distributed by research participants as well as research partners. Lastly, I shared my dissertation work with practitioners at my school sites and will be presenting to CPS policymakers in June.

Figure 17: Social work research praxis



Future Work

The challenges and stakes associated with alternative high school transfer make the case for a focus on disentangling public education from carceral logics and practices. This agenda requires a focus on examining invisible mechanisms of racialized social control and a commitment to ending them. One next clear area of study is to focus on alternative high schools. 38% of students in CPS alternative high schools have been previously arrested (compared to 3% of mainstream CPS students) and many young people leaving detention settings enroll directly

into alternative high schools. Thus, alternative high schools could be conceptualized as a point of reentry. I would be interested in piloting school-based legal aid clinics in alternative high schools. I think school-based legal aid clinics could be used expansively but I want to start by examining the impact of record expungement. Record expungement is full of administrative burdens and even though juvenile records are sealed, a fingerprint background check can prevent young adults from gaining access to postsecondary opportunities.

My dissertation on alternative high school transfer illuminates broader contradictions in public education, particularly the ways mainstream schools fail historically marginalized families. Thus, a portion of my future research will be focused on improving mainstream schools. I have plans for a mixed-method study, tentatively titled "Seeing Inside the Organizational Black Box: A Mixed Methods Study of Equity in School-based Program Access," examining how students are identified for participation in school-based services and matched with services in practice. While research establishes that school-based services can improve student disengagement, little is known about how students are identified and matched with services. The opacity in school-level processes makes it impossible to determine if service access is equitable, coherent, or aligned to student needs. Taken together this is troubling, as disengagement rates are higher among historically marginalized groups such as students of color, students with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ students.

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