

The Reality of **Unconscious Racial Bias**

What is the biggest barrier to anti-racism work in schools and districts?

When we posed this question recently to a group of education leaders working on anti-racist practices, one man raised his hand immediately. "The need to keep white people comfortable," he said. Other leaders in the audience nodded in agreement.

His answer holds true for many school and district leaders. In fact, when the two of us worked as school principals, we each made decisions based on the need to keep white people comfortable. Leaders seeking to address racism in their schools must ultimately come to terms with this deeply ingrained phenomenon.

Like many leaders, we found ourselves committed to addressing racial inequalities in our respective schools in two small urban districts. Like many school leaders, we found ourselves devising strategies for how to do this work in a way that would not cause white people to get defensive, shut down and tune out.

Sarah knew from her previous experience co-leading an anti-bias discussion group in

The admittedly uncomfortable and sometimes tense task of navigating behavioral and attitudinal change in schools

BY SARAH E. FIARMAN AND TRACEY A. BENSON

her district of Cambridge, Mass., that facilitating conversations about race and racism often got messy. When she became a principal of a 400-student, K-8 school in the district, she was afraid to lead these discussions alone as a white woman, worried she wouldn't know how to handle potential tensions among staff and, above all, concerned about making a mistake and losing her credibility as a good white person fighting for social justice.

While she justified her actions as protecting her staff from potentially tense interactions, she was ultimately protecting herself from having to navigate uncomfortable work.



As a building principal, Tracey Benson (standing) moved cautiously when using performance data disaggregated by racial subgroups.

As a new principal, she determined that racial disparities could be reduced by focusing on the data alone, without the messiness of conversations about race and racism.

Tracey's approach was also informed by past experience. As a middle school assistant principal in the district of Pittsfield, Mass., Tracey disaggregated data and pointed out racial disparities at an early staff meeting. The all-white group of teachers responded defensively to him, a Black administrator, by asking "Are you saying we're racist?" They quickly shut down and viewed him with distrust going forward.

With this in mind, as a beginning principal at the 1,000-student high school in Pittsfield, Tracey decided that his white staff would not be capable of productive discussion of racial disparities. Instead, he maintained a focus on the data and referenced "groups of students" but did not name race.

Shared Situations

In reflecting on our work as principals, we both know that while we made progress, we didn't make as much progress as we needed to when we weren't naming race and racism explicitly. From talking with hundreds of principals and

superintendents, we know our experiences are, in fact, quite common. White people fear being called racist and education leaders fear the consequences of that reaction. Most of us are stuck in what we've come to understand as a binary view of racism. This concept has been described by scholars of race, including Robin DiAngelo, author of *White Fragility*. On one side are racists who are bad people with malicious feelings toward people of color and on the other side are people with good intentions who are therefore nonracists. Within this bad racist/good nonracist binary mindset, racism is something you can choose to be exempt from.

The problem is that all the good intentions in the world can't make us immune to biased behavior. A robust body of research shows that unconscious racial bias influences practitioners' decisions in a variety of sectors, including health care, human resources, banking, policing and education. These biases influence reflexive responses at an unconscious level and are difficult if not impossible to interrupt. As education researchers Amanda Lewis and John Diamond concluded in their 2015 book *Despite the Best Intentions: How Racial Inequality Thrives in Good Schools*, "Where there is discretion, there will be discrimination."

In quick, often seemingly small decisions throughout the school day, unconscious racial bias influences who gets called on or gets probed for

deeper thinking, who is chosen for a special job or recommended for honors or pushed to improve further in written and oral responses. Bias also influences who is reprimanded more often and who is denied empathetic listening or a second chance.

Consider the cumulative effect of these actions on students. What may appear to some to be minor interactions have a significant effect on the experience of students of color in schools every day. Importantly, they also perpetuate biases among white students who experience and internalize the differential treatment as well.

We all harbor biases

Understanding that we all harbor biases — *often counter to our intentions* — is key to unlocking our ability to reduce racial disparities in school and district outcomes. Once educators are freed from defensiveness and realize that no one is questioning their intentions, they can engage in the daily work necessary to ensure students of color are consistently treated fairly with respect, high expectations and dignity.

When Tracey was a principal monitoring tran-

sition time in the halls, black students told him he was reprimanding them for loitering while ignoring white students doing the same. Rather than react defensively — “I treat all kids fairly! Are you accusing me of treating black and white students differently?” — Tracey investigated and learned they were correct. He developed a system to ensure he redirected students more fairly.

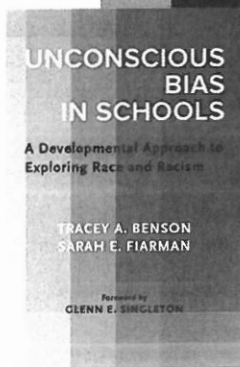
Similarly, Sarah complained to a colleague about black students in her class talking out of turn only to discover that in fact white students were doing the same thing without any consequence. This prompted her to ask peers to observe and give feedback about whether she was holding all students to the same expectations.

How can leaders develop communities where educators forgo defensiveness and adopt a mindset of inquiry to reduce the impact of racial bias on students? What can leaders do? Creating schools free of bias is not as simple as learning a few new teaching techniques or attending a one-

Sarah Fiarman greeted students at the front door of the Graham and Parks School in Cambridge, Mass., during her time as principal.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SARAH FIARMAN



Sarah Fiarman and Tracey Benson first worked together in the School Leadership Program at Harvard Graduate School of Education before collaborating on a book that examines racial bias in K-12 education.

day workshop. Combatting the impact of racial bias on students requires leaders to commit to ongoing, adaptive work.

Start with ourselves

The first step in this ongoing commitment is for leaders to start with themselves. The bad racist/good nonracist binary mindset has deep roots in all of us. None of us is immune. In fact, the two of us as co-authors saw evidence of this mindset as we collaborated on writing a book about unconscious racial bias.

While discussing a school incident when a black student accused Sarah of being racist, Tracey questioned whether the student might

have been right. He didn't accuse Sarah of intentionally treating the student unfairly but rather questioned her confidence in assessing the situation fairly. As a white woman who understands unconscious racial bias, wouldn't she want to know more about what the student was experiencing that made him say that? Wouldn't she want to at least probe to understand more of the black student's perspective?

Sarah heard Tracey's question as a lack of trust in her commitment to black students. Her defensiveness was immediate. Did he know about the strong relationships she had with black students and their families? Or how much she worked to hold her black and brown students to high academic standards? Why didn't he trust her judgment as the dedicated teacher she knew herself to be?

Tracey, meanwhile, heard Sarah's defensiveness as willful ignorance of her racial bias. Why couldn't she just consider the possibility that she might have been treating the student unfairly in some way she didn't recognize? How could she push back so hard against something so fundamental? Tracey heard Sarah's defensiveness as prioritizing her own sense of self-worth over a student's well-being.

In a moment of clarity, the two of us came to see the problem. Sarah was defending her intentions. Tracey was questioning her impact. He wasn't doubting her intentions — they just weren't relevant to his question. Tracey's persistence in helping Sarah see this — despite the emotional toll it took to continually remind Sarah how unconscious bias works — and Sarah's willingness to drop the defensiveness allowed the two of us to continue working and learning together.

Coming to terms with the ways unconscious bias works in all of us as leaders is a necessary first step in any anti-racist leader's practice. In addition to examining their own beliefs, anti-racist leaders create the conditions for others to do the same. Two high-leverage steps leaders take are to normalize talking about race and racial bias and to regularly collect and investigate data to determine the impact of bias — and ways to reduce it.

Normalize talking about race and bias

Few educators in the United States have experience talking about race and racial bias in mixed-race settings. Many white people don't have experience talking about or recognizing the impact of their racial identity at all, and some white people still mistakenly subscribe to a colorblind approach. A vital condition for addressing bias is naming race and normalizing the concept of

racial bias. It's something we all need to work on. Through modeling and reserving time for others to learn and practice, district leaders build their own and others' skills to talk about racial identity and racial bias.

We want to offer one important caution as districts move to discussing race and racism more explicitly. Too often schools and districts rely on staff of color to lead this work, often without compensation. While people of color often have more experience talking about race and understanding racism, expecting them to carry the work puts an unfair "work tax" on staff of color in a school district. In addition to their full-time jobs, staff of color are tapped to lead anti-racism initiatives, which are time-consuming (on top of a full-time job) and also emotionally taxing in that they often require working with staff who insist they don't see color, effectively denying the lived experience of their colleagues of color.

Becoming an anti-racist leader is developmental work that we all can expect to get better at. In the same way that business CEOs would never say, "I'm just not good at strategic thinking, I'll let someone else do that," committed superintendents take responsibility for building anti-racist leadership skills in themselves and others. They seek out learning opportunities, take small steps, collect feedback and understand that mistakes will help them learn. In doing so, they model these practices for others.

Collect evidence of impact

Leaders also develop a spirit of inquiry. They're not satisfied to simply insert equity language into vision and mission statements. They understand that the issue is not *whether* racial bias impacts their students but *where* and *how*. As a result, they regularly collect, disaggregate and analyze data. They model taking responsibility for results by asking, "What is the learning experience of students of color in my district? How do I know? What do we need to change in our practice in order to get better results? How will we know whether the change is an improvement?"

Prioritize the work

Above all, leaders decide that building anti-racist practices in themselves, their schools and their school districts is a priority. They recognize anti-racism isn't something to declare, it's something that needs to be cultivated and developed in a school community with ongoing vigilance and humility. As a superintendent from New Hampshire said in a recent e-mail to us: "As a leader in the community, our [district] team wants to lead

the efforts in confronting racism, beginning in our schools and inviting the town and surrounding communities to join us. ... We believe this is one of the most important values we espouse."

Learning how to address unconscious racial bias will help this school district — and others around the country — make the progress we all earnestly seek. ■

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Additional Resources

Co-authors Sarah Fiarman and Tracey Benson suggested these informational items related to their article.

ARTICLE/BOOKS

- *Biased: Uncovering the Hidden Prejudice That Shapes What We See, Think, and Do* by Jennifer Eberhardt. This book explains the research behind our unconscious racial biases and includes compelling examples from the author's personal experience and professional work.
- *So You Want to Talk About Race* by Ijeoma Oluo. A collection of short essays with clear responses to common questions about race, such as "I just got called racist, what do I do now?"
- *Unconscious Bias in Schools: A Developmental Approach to Exploring Race and Racism* by Tracey A. Benson and Sarah Fiarman. An in-depth discussion of these ideas with many relevant examples.

ONLINE/VIDEOS

- Harvard Project Implicit, a free, interactive site offering a variety of short, online tests that assess unconscious biases. <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>.
- "How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Discussing Race," a TEDx Talk by Jay Smooth. With humor, the presenter explains common pitfalls and fears in talking about race and offers suggestions for how to normalize these conversations. www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbdxeFcQtaU
- The *Seeing White* documentary podcast series explores white racial identity and explores what it means to be white in the United States today. www.sceneonradio.org/seeing-white
- 26 Mini-Films for Exploring Race, Bias and Identity With Students. In 2017, *The New York Times* curated a collection of very brief films exploring race, bias and identity through interviews with people of different races. The collection was designed for use with students but is just as informative for adult viewers. www.nytimes.com
- "Unconscious Bias in Schools: Q&A with Sarah Fiarman and Tracey Benson," an interview by Jill Anderson for Harvard EdCast. Strategies for educators to counter their own unconscious biases in schools and classrooms. (Nov. 20, 2019). www.gse.harvard.edu